

入江君人

KIMIHITO IRIE

神さまの  
いない  
日曜日  
II

KAMISAMANO  
INAI  
NICHITOURI



ファンタジア文庫



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# Kami-sama no Inai Nichiyoubi - Volume 02

## Chapter 00-02 (Incomplete)

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# Novel Illustrations

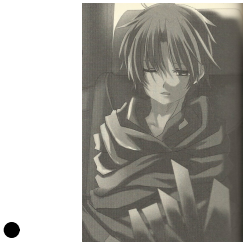
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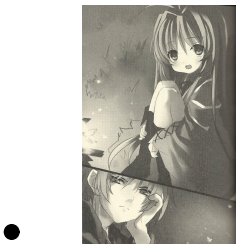
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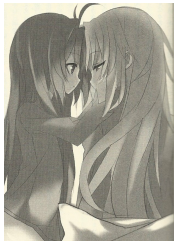
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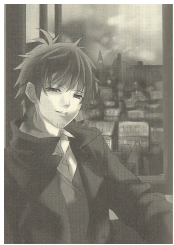
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# Prologue

## Prologue[\[edit\]](#)

From the top of the mountain to its roots, there was to be seen only a featureless, barren wilderness.

An arid wind gusted across it; nowhere was there to be found even the smallest puff of spring air. Under a thousand years of assault from the scorching wind, the plants had ceased to remember to grow upright. The insects here came in two varieties: one having evolved to being more hard, more heavy, and the other having become more small, more in number, each by its own means eking out a living in this harsh landscape. Only the lizards could bask languidly in the sun and continue to pass days of happiness.

Besides these, there was only sand and rock.

A car had been left here.

This box-shaped vehicle was the color of the blue of the skies and was as iridescent as a dragonfly. Having been abandoned here, it faced its headlamps to the west, corners drooping down just like eyes holding back tears.

In its line of sight stood two humans.

“It’s a car.”

Ai, small and young, pointed at the car and thus spoke.

“Yes, it is.”

Yuri, tall and older, nodded his head.

With an outstretched finger, Ai wiped a line across the windscreen and, sighing admiringly, said: “I only knew that you could sometimes pick up pretty rocks or fruits on mountains, but never imagined that, out here in the wilderness, you could actually pick up a car.”

“No, nor that it’d be as good as this...”

Yuri opened up the bonnet and answered as he appraised the contents. Ai, just

like a child who liked getting in the way of adults' work, peered at what he was doing from the side. She smelled metal, oil, and sourness, but of course did not understand a thing she saw.

"Will it move?"

"This car has been modified in many places, but they did a very neat job of it—looks like even the keys are still here."

Ai exhaled with her nose and kneeled before the headlamps.

"Were you abandoned?"

The car kept silent as if deeply unhappy.

"...Where did the owner of this car go?"

The car refused to respond, and so Ai got up and asked the question again. It was a woman's voice who replied: "It should be these two, no?"

Ai looked around the other side of the car and found Scar standing here, pointing at the ground with her shovel. There was a patch of earth there that was moister than the rest and looked to have been turned only hours ago, and two large pieces of rock had even been placed there like headstones.

The two looked one another in the eyes and, mutely, prayed for the dead.

...

"It really is mysterious."

"Yeah."

Ai raised her index finger and spoke.

"Who was it that buried these two?"

"A Grave Keeper, of course."

So Scar said.

Ai raised a second finger.

"But, why here, in this sort of place? Why just put the car here and leave it?"

"Who can tell? I am not in charge of organizing the thoughts of humanity."

The lines Scar used to avoid questions exemplified the manner of Grave Keepers, and made Ai sigh and turn to glance up at the man beside her.

“I think there has to be some purpose to it.”

With that, Yuri climbed without hesitation into the driver’s seat. Ai, seeing this, carefully raised herself into the seat beside his.

This was her first time riding in a car.

“They probably came here with a purpose as well, but having not achieved it after all, ended up to rest the way they are now.”

Coughs and splutters issued from the engine as Yuri started up the car.

“The reason why they just left behind this car...”

The engine started up amid a thundering noise that seemed fit to shake the earth. The vibrations made Ai jump in shock and then cling to her seat.

“Should be because they didn’t need it any more.”

The entire car began to vibrate regularly.

As if deep in thought, Yuri folded his arms around the steering wheel and didn’t speak.

“...You’re not thinking of stealing it, are you?”

Ai creased her forehead, displeased.

“And I thought you’d have more common sense than this...”

“Well, normally I wouldn’t do this sort of thing. It’s just that this time... You know, my car was originally meant to be parked on this stretch too.”

The car vibrated some more.

“I’d driven that car for a long time and had kept it maintained well. When I got here and prepared to ascend the mountain, I abandoned the car without even removing the keys. Do you know why I did that?”

Ai already knew the reason for it but didn’t want to say it out loud, and so didn’t speak.

“It’s because I was about to go meet my death. Whenever I thought of this

place, I'd also wind up thinking about what to do with what I owned after dying. That was quite strange, really. That car was the only thing left that I owned, but I had no way of getting it back onto the road, and had hoped at least to leave it for others to use."

And that's why I left my car behind, the blue-eyed man added.

"It passes the tire check, and can leave at any time."

Scar sat at the back. With her were rugs, teapots, kettles and the like, a whole pile of baffling objects stuffed together, by some baffling means, in an orderly chaos.

"...I wonder what wishes those two had when they were still alive."

Ai tilted her head back to look and found the headstones to be out of her range of vision.

"Who knows...maybe they wanted to save the world."

The adult thus mocked.

"Maybe. Then, as for me..."

The child nodded with complete seriousness.

"I will continue on their dream."

And gripped her shovel tightly as she spoke.

"Oh?"

"Yes. So, oh, we can probably count as the rightful inheritors of this car."

"I didn't think you could be this flexible too."

Yuri, wanting to get accustomed to the car first, slowly pushed the accelerator down and drove the car forward. Tires sending pebbles flying, the car found its way onto a structure that could just be seen as having once been a road.

West-bound, they advanced.

Ai looked northwards from her side seat.

Up in the north, there was a mountain. On the mountain, there was a village. In the village were her home, her parents, and all the villagers she once adored.

All of her past lay in that direction, north.

The two graves rested in the place that she had only just arrived at.

“Goodbye.”

Ai lowered her head for a long moment in that direction.

“Let’s go.”

Said Scar, smiling gently.

Yuri said nothing, and just stepped on the accelerator.

The man, the child, and the female Grave Keeper.

The three thus began their journey.

“Oh, right, what about this youth here?”

“Huh?!”

Emergency brake.

So actually, they were four.

# Chapter 1 - The City and the Youth

## Chapter 1: The City and the Youth[\[edit\]](#)

### Part I[\[edit\]](#)

The car was just like a toy box, divided into three rows of seats and quite spacious on the inside. Ai found her right side seat quite comfortable: even if she were to stand up there would still be room to spare. There was a gap between the driver's seat and the side seat wide enough to walk through to the back.

Yuri and Ai peeked their heads through this gap, fixed their eyes on the back seats, and stared.

The scene there looked rather complicated.

Cast your gaze into the inside of the car. See the ceiling with its electric lights and glow-painted star-shaped stickers; the seats, a light coffee brown, shining with the distinct glow exclusive to much-used leather; the interior damaged all over, with the scars of bumps or spilled liquids clearly visible.

And then the luggage, much of which was of inexplicable purpose. This here was probably a tent; that there was probably a sleeping bag. Pots, kettles, pans, rods, boots, dolls: it was all put together in a way that seemed to defy neatness, which is to say that there was absolutely no way an observer could tell how it was arranged. And yet, looking upon this sight awhile, you'd also find yourself, somehow, enjoying it.

It was surrounded by all these that Scar smiled a soft little smile across the whole of her face. She sat elegantly in the middle of the back seat and gazed down with gracious eyes at the object next to her.

Had Scar not called it a youth, Yuri and Ai would never have discovered it to be a human.

The object in question was a garbage bag, placed horizontally beside Scar. Made of ripped canvas, it had already lost its luster and was now stone-grey in

color. If there was a person contained within it, he would find it most narrow and uncomfortable.

Ai moved to act.

She drew her shovel from her seat and poked lightly at the sack. While her expression was entirely serious, the movements of her hands were those of a prank-loving child.

The bag let out an ahing sound and turned over.

Ai and Yuri looked, bemused, at one another.

“Y-Yuri-san, there’s someone on the car! W-What should we do? Could he be the owner of this car?”

“I’ve been far too careless...Ai, you’d better get ready to get off at any time.”

Saying this, Yuri pulled a revolver from his jacket.

“What are you pulling that gun out for?”

“We’ve never met before, so who knows what kind of person he is?”

Ai saw the meaning of his words and swiftly agreed.

“That’s true... then, the way you put it, meeting strangers for the first time is quite dangerous after all.”

“You get it now?”

“Yup! I mean, I’ve met quite a few people for the first time lately, and they all ended up pointing guns at me or taking me hostage.”

“... I was going to say ‘Of course!’ to that, but now it doesn’t sound like such a good idea...”

It got up.

The garbage bag slowly got up and fell away to reveal the object contained within.

Ai thought this youth from inside the bag was very pretty.

And then she realized that this was the first person she’d met from the outside world and panicked a little, unprepared as she was for this first meeting.

Yuri reacted completely as expected, and even Scar put on quite a serious expression.

But the youth seemed barely to notice the tense atmosphere that surrounded him, and his blank face exhibited only a state of 'just having woken up'. His dark-eyed gaze wandered in the far-off distance, his light blue hair was a shock of messy tangles like freshly whipped cream, and his lower body was still in the bag, so that only the green sweater he wore was visible to his watchers.

The youth shook his head and looked in order at the gun, smile, and shovel before him.

"..."

Nobody said a word.

Ai looked around at her companions, casting at them expressions asking "What should we do?", but it looked as if none of them had any idea as to what to do next.

"...Morning."



The youth had suddenly dipped his head and greeted them. Ai couldn't help but be a little stunned at this, but felt that it was only right to respond in kind.

“Good morning.”

The other two seemed to feel the same way, and so everyone, in varying pitches and tones, greeted him a good morning.

The youth then said:

“... In that case...”

In a caterpillar-like motion he twisted his body around and lay down, and pulled the bag back up to the top of his head.

“... Goodnight...”

And he slept.

“Hey, wait a minute! Don’t just go back to sleep like that!”

Ai gave a yell and jumped from her seat over to the youth, nimble as a cat.

“How could you do this?! How could you even dare try to go back to sleep at a time like this?

Without giving thought to courtesy or to the maxim of ‘thinking before acting’, she shook the garbage bag and the youth within it with all her strength.

“Hey!... But... I’m—already—very—sleepy...”

“You’re not allowed to sleep any more! Just look at how dirty this bag is! Hurry up and get out!”

As if faced with a child curled up under his blankets and unwilling to get out, Ai pulled the bag off him in one quick motion. The youth didn’t resist at all, and was rolled headlong beneath the seat, his clothes parting to reveal his stomach.

And then his hands, hitherto concealed behind his back.

Handcuffs.

Steel handcuffs had been clamped around the youth’s seedling-thin hands.

“So tired...”

And the youth, even in this condition, was woozy and half-asleep.

“ ... ”

Silence returned to the car. Ai, hands still holding the garbage bag high, immediately sensed that something was wrong.

“W-What happened to you?! Are you alright?!”

“That’s not important right now... I’m tired...”

“How can it not be important? This is very important!”

“Ai, hold on a second. There’s something strange going on here.”

Yuri squeezed his large body into the first row of seats at the back: and a space which would have fit three people with ease immediately became very cramped.

“The way it looks... he must have been made to inhale a drug of some kind.”

As gently as if he were handling a newborn baby, Yuri secured the youth’s neck and head and carefully laid him down. He then observed his eyes, examined his hands, smelled the scent in his mouth.

“Looks like the buds of the harumodoki fruit...”

“Huh? You mean that red fruit, the tasty one...?”

“It’s that fruit all right; but the buds, when dried, can be used as a psychoactive drug.”

Yuri lifted up the youth’s head and gave him plenty of water to drink. Scar had, in all this fuss, also changed seats and was now acting as his assistant.

“Those bastards...”

The rage emanating from Yuri sent chills up Ai’s spine.

“To use such a large dose on a kid like him... If they’d only slipped up there’d be after-effects for sure...”

With Yuri being so angry at the men who’d treated the youth thus, Ai was immediately infected with his sense of righteousness, and her breathing became a little deeper as well.

“I can only say that this has the air of a conspiracy!”

His attention divided, Yuri responded with a noncommittal “Completely” and continued to treat the youth. He undid the buttons on the youth’s shirt,

loosened his belt, and put him in a lying position, carefully lest he vomit. Scar also helped him from the side.

Ai wanted to help too.

“... Is there anything that I can help with?”

“No.”

Yuri’s reply was quite cold.

“Really?... No?...”

Ai felt as though she were being ostracized, and went desolately to a corner.

“Ah... No, wait.”

“Okay! I’ll do anything!”

“No, I’m talking about this.”

Yuri clapped his hands together as if he’s just come up with a good idea.

“We’re not going to get a chance like this again, so we’d better try to find out anything he knows—hey, kid! Where’re you from? What’s your name? Why’re you in a place like this? Who was it who did this to you?”

“You villain—!”

Ai yelled out loud in the midst of this wilderness.

“It’s a villain! There’s a real, live, evil villain here!”

The lizards around turned their heads toward the commotion as if to ask, “Ah, is that so?”

“Hey! Don’t make it sound so bad!”

“But you really are a villain!”

Ai chased Yuri away to protect the youth.

“...Ah...I am a citizen of Ortus, and my name is...”

The youth replied the questions as though he was talking in his sleep.

“You don’t have to answer, you know.”

The youth ignored Ai and continued to speak.

“My name is... Kiriko... Pox... Rex... Diva... Oreus... Veruera... Ul... Helios... Melza...Gaug... Digg...”

The youth still hadn't finished speaking his name.

“... Amita... Baaz... Geiauf... Elsespoff... Setzafuore...” [\[1\]](#)

It didn't matter how you look at it, this string of enchantment-like words just didn't seem to be a person's name.

Ai stood slack-jawed in bewilderment, so incomprehensible did she find those words.

“... Did you say Oreus?”

But that didn't seem to be the case with Yuri.

“Yuri-san, is there something you know about this?”

“... No, nothing at all.”

From Yuri's expression it was clear that he regretted his choice of words, but he persisted in barefacedly evading Ai's questions.

Ai wanted to continue questioning him, but at this point the youth's voice became thick as he struggled to speak.

“... I was... captured... by those men...”

“You don't have to force yourself to speak, you know; and besides, we can't understand a word you say.”

“Ha... You haven't changed a bit... You're still just the same as before...”

“He said I haven't changed a bit, that I'm still just the same as before!”

“He probably mistook you for someone else, so just let it go.

“Ha... Ha ha ha...”

The youth suddenly began laughing as though impossibly happy. His smile was just like a child's: completely genuine.

“Your Highness... You're lively and well today, I see.”

Your Highness?

“Huh? Is he talking about me? No, don’t go calling me a Highness, I’d get embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry, he’s definitely not talking about you.”

“Besides... aren’t you a little short for my Princess?”

“Hmph. How rude.”

“Ha ha ha... I beg your pardon.”

This youth was probably fourteen, fifteen years old, and yet now seemed even younger than Ai as he laughed in the most innocent of manners.

“Even if he somehow regressed to being a child this doesn’t seem entirely right.”

“Yeah, it just doesn’t match how he’s so very childlike but his speech is so refined.”

“... Do you even have a right to say that?”

“Huh? Is there something wrong about it?”

Yuri very courteously shut his mouth and kept his silence.

“Ha ha ha, Your Highness.”

The youth continued to address Ai in a manner completely unbefitting her, so Ai could only reply: “Okay, okay, I’m a princess, what is it?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“So why’d you call me?”

“I just suddenly wanted to.”

“Honestly... Your Princess-sama is going to get angry at you now.”

“Ah, scary...”

So the youth said; but the smile on his face didn’t seem frightened at all.

“But if Your Highness were to actually get angry... That would be difficult. It would be difficult for everyone, difficult and painful. Of course it’d be the same for me... This really would be quite difficult to deal with.

The youth smiled gently and continued to speak.

“So, my Princess, please do not be angry.”

“..... Honestly... I’m not angry any more, look.”

It was sighing that Ai said these words.

Hearing it, the youth smiled a child’s smile.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness..... Your Highness?”

His smile suddenly dimmed.

On his expression of innocence was tinged the color of consciousness, as on a canvas of pure white is streaked a brush of red.

“..... Who are you people?”

His black-colored eyes instantly recovered the sharpness they should have had at this their master’s age, and stared with complete poise at the row of people before them.

His expression had already lost its resemblance to a kitten fed full that only knows happiness; now, it was more akin to a cat injured and ready to spring at any and all.

“Ow!”

The youth had wanted to prop himself up, but at that the handcuffs on his wrists had dug into his flesh, hurting him so much that he’d fallen over on the spot.

“Hey, don’t move around so—

“Do not touch me!”

Even with his hands cuffed, even with his mind drugged, the youth hadn’t lost his fighting spirit and he shouted with all his might.

“Who are you people! Where did they go!”

“When you say ‘they’ who are you talking about?”

“Huh?... The people who rescued me, the owner of this car...”

“Oh... I think they probably died...”

“This I know! What I meant was what happened to them afterwards!”

Ai’s eyes widened in surprise, but she continued to answer his question.

“They... should be buried there...”

She slid the door open with a *shaaang* and pointed at the two graves some distance off.

“... Idiots... To be buried by Grave Keepers...”

The youth’s tone was tinged with regret, and he hung his head in sorrow.

Ai looked up at Yuri beside her.

“I just can’t make head nor tail of what’s going on.”

“Me neither.”

“Excuse me, could you explain it all more clearly to us?”

“... You... what kind of...”

“Ah, I never told you my name, did I? I’m Ai—Ai Astin.

Hearing this, the youth’s eyes immediately widened, and he wore again his previous expression of innocence.

“Kiriko Zubreska.

It wasn’t the same as the one he’d said before.

“I am a resident of Ortus, city of a million souls.”

## Part II[[edit](#)]

On Monday, God created the world.

On Tuesday, God demarcated order and chaos.

On Wednesday, God arranged the numbers of the universe.

On Thursday, God permitted the ebb and flow of time.

On Friday, God explored every nook and cranny of the world.

On Saturday, God rested.

And then on Sunday, God forsook the world.

Fifteen years ago, God suddenly appeared before the people and said:

“Hell and Heaven now are crowded and full, and soon the time will come for this Earth too. Ah, I have failed.”

God left behind just these words before vanishing without a trace. At the time, humanity, still busy rejoicing with song and praise of their spring-like world, was naturally set a-trembling with fear. Their species had existed for fewer than a billion years and it was their first time meeting God; and yet His first words to them were ones of farewell.

From that day onwards, humans no longer died.

Even as their hearts stopped and their flesh decayed, the dead continued to move.

From that day onwards, humans were no longer born.

It was as if some divine factory had stopped production and would never again manufacture new humans.

And in the world God had forsaken mankind keened for its loss. Billions keened and wailed and shrieked until their throats gave and they coughed up blood, until they stood on the very verge of death. The living soon dwindled in number, and the world teemed to overflowing with the dead.

And afterwards, the Grave Keepers appeared.

The Grave Keepers were God’s final miracle to men.

They built graves and buried the restless dead to prevent them from disrupting the peace of the living. It was only then that men could rest in easeful sleep.

Children not being born; the dead always wandering; the Grave Keepers always in pursuit.

Such is the very image of the apocalypse.

Ai was a Grave Keeper, and she had a dream.

She dreamed to save the world.

Her mother had built Heaven, her father had vanquished [\[2\]](#) Hell. Ai had inherited their dream and wished to be able to save the world.

Even though she knew not any means of doing so, she did not want to give up.

For the journey had only just begun.

\*

Merely an act as simple as driving a car forward was enough to elicit a great many emotions in Ai. The car scared her to no end at its shaking and rattling; the scenery as it flashed by shocked her at its speed, so much greater than that of walking; and the view of the featureless wasteland in front frightened her at how it changed not once despite how fast they went.

Ai opened the side window to the full, not caring that the wind whipped her hair wildly into her face, and not minding that Scar quietly disapproved; she was concerned only with act of greeting the wilderness in as loud a voice as she could muster. That no matter how long she waited no echo would answer her was something she found difficult to grasp.

Whether it was the car, the scenery, or the winds of the wild, to Ai it was something glorious she had never before seen or felt or tasted. She took in with her every sense all that was about her.

Her very first time leaning out of a car window earned her her very first rap on the head from Yuri. “Don’t lean your head out of the window.”

Ai felt at the still-smarting bruise and continued to gaze out at the wilderness.

It was supremely wide and spacious, seeming to be practically boundless in

size.

“Now that you’ve looked your fill it’s about time to close that window.”

She wanted very much to refuse.

“... It’s not good for his body.”

Ai saw the truth in his words and quickly reached to shut the window. The rubber was a little sticky, giving her no little difficulty in her task; but eventually she closed it tight with a snap.

Ai’s ears had already acclimatized to the interior of the car and automatically blocked out any noise from the engines. Thus, without the howling of the wind the car became abnormally quiet.

“...Kiriko, are you awake?”

“No, he’s still sleeping quite soundly.”

Ai sneaked a look behind her and saw that Kiriko, taking up an entire row of seats, was indeed very deeply in sleep.

After telling them his name a moment ago, Kiriko had immediately collapsed with exhaustion and lost consciousness. It seemed that his sudden awakening and the exciting of his emotions had done no good to his body.

Ai let out a breath and watched the sleeping youth.

His face was ashen and his breathing shallow. His brows were knotted in a frown and his countenance was as dark as if he were in the middle of a nightmare: nowhere was there even a trace of his earlier glowing<sup>[3]</sup> gentleness. Ai began to wonder which one it was that was the true Kiriko. Was it the Kiriko soft and pleasant, or the Kiriko like a hedgehog?

“... Scar-san, please tell us immediately if something happens to Kiriko.”

“All right.”

Scar replied so from the back seat. Completed with her task of nursing Kiriko, Scar had squeezed to the back of the car to tidy up the mess there and was currently seeing eye to eye with an agreeable-looking<sup>[4]</sup> piggy-bank made of ceramic. Ai quietly swore to herself absolutely not to disturb her labors.

Silence.

Yuri, seeming to have merged into the being of the car, drove on mutely.

Ai sat with rigid posture in the side seat looking at him.

Silence.

Yuri, sensing a pothole some distance ahead, vacillated between turning left or right to avoid it.

Ai peered all about herself looking at the various devices installed on the car. She couldn't work out what purpose the two rods on the windscreen served.

Silence.

Eventually Yuri decided to turn right to avoid the pothole.

Ai had nothing left to do and so could only look out ahead of them.

Silence.

The wilderness seemed to stretch on without end.

"Hey, is it going to be like this forever?"

"... What kind of nonsense are you spouting now?"

Ai pointed with a finger at the wilderness and then at herself.

"It's just that... You know... I'm so boreeeeeed."

On Yuri's face could have been written in large block letters the words "What gives?"

"... What're you whining about this to me for?"

"But, but! Doesn't it feel like something's about to happen? Like once it happens we're not going to be able to stop? Doesn't it?"

Yuri slammed his foot on the brakes.

Ai slammed her forehead on the windscreen.

"Hey, it hurts!"

"Sorry, there was a pothole that I didn't spot there."

Yuri released the brakes and the accelerated forward. The scenery began to fly

by once again.

“Journeys are by nature boring like this.”

Yuri genuinely meant what he said, but Ai was having none of it.

“Ha!—I refuse to believe that.”

“... Since you’re so bored, I sincerely hope you learn to drive soon.”

“Oh! Can I drive?”

Ai was brimming with enthusiasm at this, but Yuri quickly threw cold water over it and put it out.

“... What, can you reach the pedals?”

“...”

It was a cruel silence that followed.

“...”

And the car was from this moment on dominated by silence, with Ai not even mentioning the word “bored” again.

\*

“It looks like Kiriko-san is about to wake up.”

It was only a long while afterwards that Scar spoke this, breaking the silence within the car.

Ai picked out a pocket watch and checked the time. It felt as though much, much time had passed, but in reality they had not reached even noon yet.

“Ahhh...”

Ai let out a delicate yawn and looked backward to find Kiriko still asleep and his color rather improved.

“He looks like he’s still sleeping to me.”

“Indeed, which was why I said he was about to wake... his breathing patterns

have altered, and I trust he will recover consciousness soon.”

Scar’s prediction came to pass in mere seconds.

Wrapped in a rug, Kiriko weakly opened his eyes and looked blearily about him.

“Oh, are you awake?”

“... And who might you be?”

Saying this, he immediately retracted his lost expression and spread out in its place one of wary grimness.

“... Was I unconscious all this time?”

“Yeah, you’d just finished telling us your name before you went and fainted away.”

Kiriko didn’t seem to have regained complete control over his body just yet, resulting in his gaze wandering continuously all around the car, examining its every nook and cranny.

“You don’t have to be as cautious as this now, do you...”

“Whether or not I must be cautious is something I will decide for myself.”

Ai sighed quietly. It looked as though this prickly, wary Kiriko was the true one after all. Looking at him, Ai was put in mind of a wounded fox<sup>[5]</sup> she had once found on the mountains.

“... Where are you driving to?”

Kiriko had noticed the scenery flying past and raised the question.

“To Ortus.”

Ai replied thus.

“What are you people trying to...”

Still speaking, Kiriko tried to prop himself upright and discovered something.

In order to push himself up, he had automatically reached out with his hands to support his weight.

“Ah, we couldn’t unlock your handcuffs so we just cut the chain for now.”

“...”

Kiriko raised his hands as though receiving a gift of some sort and appraised them: the chain linking the cuffs clamped around his wrists had indeed been cut and the whole assemblage rendered nonfunctional.

“... What are you people trying to do?”

Kiriko repeated his question once more.

“We’re not trying to do anything at all.”

“.....”

“... I’m telling the truth, you know.”

Ai sighed.

“Ai.”

Hands on the steering wheel, Yuri addressed her.

“I know you’re telling the truth, but if you say that to a stranger you’re just going to put him at a loss. Don’t give him too much of a headache.”

Kiriko supported his still-woozy head with his arm and sat upright.

“... What exactly are you people?”

“I would rather you did not pursue this line of questioning.”

Yuri deflected the question very firmly.

“... Ah, that’s true. Excuse my presumptuousness.”

Despite very clearly being rejected, Kiriko merely apologized with a relaxed calmness by way of response.

“... Looks like you’re quite a sensible person here.”

And that, of course, upset Ai.

“..... So you’re saying that I’m not?”

“Ai, in this world honesty is not a virtue at all... Ah, never mind, just go sit and watch from the side.”

This said, Yuri began to speak to Kiriko, their eyes never meeting.

“I’ll introduce myself first. I am Yuri Sakuma Dmitriyevich; nice to meet you. This here is Scar. My hands are full right now, and you’d best continue lying down to rest, so let’s leave the handshakes for later.”

“I am Kiriko Zubreska. I thank you for your kindness in friendship... and also in rescuing me.”

“If you’re thanking people don’t forget about those two: they’ve been very worried about you all this time.”

“Oh, then—thank you very much to the two of you; it’s all because of you that I am saved.”

With a shocked expression on her face Ai accepted his thanks. In a drastic departure from their earlier tone and manner toward each other, the two now conversed with such great ease that they might have rehearsed it all beforehand.

“So how did you end up like this?”

“Apologies, but this is a matter which concerns the welfare of the entire city: and so I must request you not to ask me of it any more... Equally, I shall not probe into your respective affairs or histories.”

In Kiriko’s eyes gleamed an eagle-sharp light.

“... Your circumstances are most curious, after all... You just appeared on foot in exactly that sort of place... And you, a woman and a girl of the last generation... You don’t like much like family either...”

He spoke these words of intimidation most politely, but Yuri brushed them off seemingly without noticing them.

“How’s Oreus doing nowadays?”

“..... What did you just say?”

On Kiriko’s face there appeared an expression of great shock.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t reply: after all, if it’s something I don’t have to know then I have no interest in finding it out.”

Silence.

“But I think it’s best that you tell me about your capture, because that could

very well bring on immediate danger to us all.”

“ ... ”

“Or do you not wish to reveal even that much?”

Yuri was implying that if Kiriko was considering such a course of action, he’d have no choice but to change his mind soon.

“... No, you are quite right. This is something I should be telling you of my own volition.”

Kiriko apologized, and began to tell his story from its beginning.

The conversation had gone very smoothly, but Ai found herself disliking that interaction between the man and the youth.

\*

Kiriko lived in a city called Ortus, and was an intern working in the public sector. His main day-to-day work consisted of running errands for his superiors, and it wasn’t unusual for him to have to traverse the entire city to deliver an item or a message. Sometimes his errands even took him out of the city: in these instances he would have to ride a motorcycle out to the neighboring settlements that were his destination. This time he’d taken his letters and boarded his bike as usual, and gone and ridden a whole day out in the wilderness.

He said it was when he was out delivering letters that he was kidnapped.

“... I probably don’t have any right to say this, but those men who kidnapped me were complete amateurs, both in their equipment and in their methods...”

Even with his memory hazed over by the drug, Kiriko remembered this particular part with complete clarity. Of the kidnappers there were ten or so men; they had set up a ramshackle trap on the road and with it crashed Kiriko’s motorcycle when he came along.

But what followed afterward was difficult to explain: it seemed that there was infighting among the kidnappers, and before anyone was really aware of it Kiriko

had been stuffed into this car.

Its two owners were *once* living men.

Kiriko stressed “once” here, because the two had died in the process of rescuing him.

“They got to have a lot of fun and died happy... All along they never really had any intention of saving me, and only wanted a chance to have an ‘honorable’ death and go out fighting.”

Which explained their quick burial.

“... I might be better off if it had not been for them.”

And that Kiriko finished his story.

“... I don’t think you should make the people who saved you sound as bad as that...”

Ai spoke unhappily.

“Indeed, that is true... I’ve been too critical of them.”

That he could retract his words with such great ease made Ai bristle at his manner even more.

“... Do you actually think that?”

“That’s what I said, so of course I do.”

Sparks flared between the two.

“Hmm, so the region around Ortus is probably unsafe...”

Yuri gave up caring about the two children and began to think, ignoring everything about him in his concentration.

“Okay, we’re not going to Ortus after all, then.”

“H-hey!”

The two who had been glaring at one another just a moment ago hurriedly swung their joint gaze towards Yuri.

“T-that’s different from what you just said!”

“Well, now, just calm down a little first, both of you.”

Saying this, Yuri stopped the car.

He took out a map from within his shirt and showed it to them.

“You were originally headed to this town here, right?”

“... Yes.”

“All right, then I’ll drive you there.”

“... I see. All right, this works out even better for me... but what about you?”

“We’ll turn back once we’ve brought you to the town. We’ll say our goodbyes there.”

“Huh? What? Why?”

Ai was the only one unable to accept this new development.

“Ai, you asked me the reason for this, so tell me: why is it that you want to go to Ortus?”

Yuri returned with a question of his own, incomprehension clear on his features.

“Well, that’s obviously because I want to go there.”

“I’m asking you, why do you want to go there?”

“What do you mean, why?... It’s because I want to.”

“... Argh, is that so? So it’s just because you want to, is that it?”

Yuri looked as though he was trying to bear with a headache, and a painful one at that.

“All right, never mind, we’ll find some other day to go to Ortus.”

With this, Yuri pressed down on the accelerator. Ai was deeply displeased with his manner, but was unable to say a word about it.

\*

She was carsick.

Ai wondered where she did wrong. Was it her thinking about the future, or her helping Scar on the back seat clean up that strange tanuki-shaped plaster statuette? Or was it her counting, in her boredom, the serrated parts of the window frames all the way up to eight hundred...?

Whatever it was, the upshot was that Ai gave everyone on the car a headache. She switched places with Kiriko and tried to sleep on the middle row of seats.

With her face half covered with a towel, she looked aimlessly up ahead.

She could see up on the front seats Kiriko and Yuri both peering at the map and conversing in whispers to one another. When she focused her gaze on the map she felt like vomiting and so quickly looked someplace else.

“Ah, are you awake now?”

Kiriko had noticed her gaze.

“... I was always awake.”

That was what Ai said, but it wasn't convincing at all. Without her noticing it, the shaking that rocked her body had eased somewhat, and her urge to throw up had diminished greatly. Ai slowly sat up and looked out the windows, and found that the road had already become much wider than before: it seemed that she'd fallen asleep some time ago without being aware of it. She checked her watch and saw the hour hand had progressed two hours from before. The weather was no longer the sunny clearness of noon and it was now overcast, the grey clouds crowding up the sky looking as solid as rocks and just as hard too.

Ai could see flashes of lightning far off in her field of vision, so far away that the accompanying thunder was completely inaudible.

And close to where the lightning flashed, she could also see a roiling, twisting dragon of white.

“... Is that a tornado?”

“Where!”

Kiriko asked this with a grim expression on his face and looked where Ai was

pointing; and at this he relaxed.

“So it’s still that far away... we’re lucky you spotted it early.”

The two of them watched through the car windows. Little raindrops attached themselves to the glass and danced in adorable motions along with the shaking of the car. Beneath that seeming-solid layer of cloud it hammered with rain or flashed with lightning or gusted up into tornadoes, but everywhere else the sun shone bright and rainbows could be seen connecting the sky and the earth.

The sun, the rain, the tornado, and the storm. All these were as disparate as oil and water, but as they existed beside one another, each minding its own business, they melded together to form the emulsion of an inconceivable photograph.<sup>[6]</sup>

“... It’s my first time seeing a tornado.”

There was a sight completely removed from those of the mountains, right before her eyes.

“... I want to go someplace closer to watch it...”

“I would advise against that.”

Kiriko replied with a serious expression on his face.

“Don’t underestimate a tornado just because it looks small and thin: when it comes to it it can tear up not just cars but houses too, and as for humans we might as well be stray leaves for all it cares.”

“Really?”

“It’s true. That’s why every house in the towns on this plain has a basement to be used as a tornado shelter.”

“Ohhh. Does your house have one, Kiriko-san?”

“No. But that’s because Ortus rarely ever gets tornadoes, since the mountains always deflect the winds southwards.”

Saying this, Kiriko fiddled with some buttons on the dashboard and turned on the radio. From its speakers issued—complete with plenty of noise—a weather program warning travelers about the tornado in the area.

“W-what is this!”

“What do you mean, what? It’s a radio... Did you not even know that?”

“Well, it’s my first time seeing one, or maybe I should say hearing one.”

“..... You’re strange.”

“Ahem!”

At this point there was a cough deliberately intended to break up their conversation.

“You can see it now.”

Yuri pointed ahead with his chin. Kiriko inspected the map and Ai peeked her head over the front seat headrest, eyes fixed on the windscreen and what was to be seen through it.

She could see buildings spread across the horizon.

“What kind of place is that?”

“... It’s an old-style supply station. They earn money mainly through the inn, gas station, and repair shop that form the economic center of the town. There’re still people there, like food sellers, who’ll run up the road to you without caring for their own safety, so we’d best be careful.”

“Both food and the dead are welcome to me.”

“Huh? What? No, there probably aren’t any dead among the residents here, because this is a town of the living.”

Yuri coughed loudly in an obvious attempt to stop Ai from saying things that shouldn’t be said.

But it wasn’t very effective.

“Yuri-san, did you catch a cold? Take better care of yourself, okay?”

The car pulled to a stop, the driver’s door opened, and Yuri got off the car. Grasping Ai by the collar, he lifted her outside from the middle seats and walked seventeen steps to the north.

“Ai.”

“W-what are you doing? You’ll break the collar...”

“Please do your best to conceal your identity as a Grave Keeper.”

Ai blinked several times in quick succession and, ignoring the fact that she was still being carried like a kitten, raised a finger.

“Technically, I’m half human and half Grave Keeper.”

“... That you have to hide all the more. If you agree to this, you’d be giving all of us a big help.”

Aspect filled with dislike, Yuri held the object in his right hand further away from him.

“Ai, I’m now going to say something very important to you. Please don’t feel hurt at it.”

“You’re telling other people not to be hurt at something you yourself are saying to them. That’s really quite inconsiderate, you know. Just as I’d expect from Yuri-san.”

“What are you, a prodigy at riling people up?”

“I’m hurt now.”

“Really? Then you’ve got to try harder... Ai, listen to me.

Saying this, he glanced toward Kiriko. The youth had stayed very politely in the car, and hadn’t looked even once in their direction.

Yuri suddenly released Ai and set her back on the ground.

“In this day and age mankind bears enmity toward the Grave Keepers.”

“Huh?”

“Just think about it: the living and the Grave Keepers have nothing to do with one another and so they don’t mind each other’s presence. But as for the dead... The ones that still roam the earth are almost all of them people who don’t want their lives to end. If you were to tell them that you’re a Grave Keeper, they’d kill you without a second thought.”

Ai’s mouth gaped wide as she looked up at Yuri in shock.

“... Look, over there.”

Yuri pointed toward a patch of ground out of which stuck a pole with a handle.

“... What’s that?”

“It’s the grave of a Grave Keeper.”

Upon closer inspection, the pole turned out to be a shovel thrust into the ground.

“A Grave Keeper’s grave...”

“Most likely he or she was killed by the dead, and then buried here.”

“How...”

Ai sank helplessly to the ground.

“This just isn’t right.”

Yuri nodded his head in agreement.

“But that’s the way it is. That’s the way civilization has now become... From that day fifteen years ago, bit by bit the world changed until it’s now become like this.”

Ai did not respond.

“Do you understand now, Ai?”

“...”

“Ai.”

Yuri had to have her reply. Despondent, Ai picked up a handful of sand, stood up, and cast it aside with what force she could muster.

“... I understand, all right... But I just can’t accept it...”

“I’m not asking that much of you... Just knowing it is enough.”

“But...”

Ai continued to speak. Defiantly she looked right up at Yuri and his blue-colored eyes.

“But, Yuri-san, if there comes a time when I think I have to, then...”

Her gaze was pointed practically vertical; and, barely even thinking of the height difference between her and Yuri that was as great as an amputated limb, she opened her eyes wide and spoke.

“I will surely be unable to help saying it.”

“When that time comes you can decide for yourself.”

The two returned to the car. On the way back Yuri had taken two steps and Ai three, when— “Yuri-san.”

“Hmm?”

“It hurts.”

“...”

When the two finished walking their respective fifteen and thirty steps back to the car, Kiriko only greeted them with a “Welcome back” and asked them no questions at all.

Yuri released the handbrake and pressed down on the accelerator.

The town grew nearer and nearer.

“All right, looks like this is goodbye... A lot happened, not all of it pleasant; but thank you all very much regardless.

Ahead, they saw a white-colored building that seemed to spill out from the horizon.

“... That went by fast, didn't it...”

Yuri fixed his eyes forward, suspicious.

“It's not as if anything sad happened anyway”

Was it the buildings?

“Ai.”

“Ha! Have it your way.”

“Ai!”

Yuri let out a loud exclamation.

“W-What is it?”

“Take a look at the town for me... Ah, don’t bother, I can see it now. Damn it! What kind of joke is this supposed to be!”

The town was structured like a sandwich. The buildings were the bread, the road was the filling in between: the former clustered in neat rows left and right, and the latter leading straight into the horizon. The bread of the this sandwich was very colorful, much more so than the filling within: each building was painted in a different color, some in more than one, making the town seem wonderfully bright and gaudy.

And this same colorful section lay before them, in ruins.

“What happened here...”

The party took a collective gasp of shock. Not a single one of the houses before them lay complete and whole: the entire town had been devastated so thoroughly that even the walls and pillars of houses had been splintered and reduced to wood and stone, flotsam of this ferocious gale.

“It was the tornado...”

Kiriko was muttering dazedly to himself.

“It must have swept straight through...”

The car slowed and entered the town. The remains of houses that lined the road seemed too few to account for the wholesale destruction that had occurred here, and soon they saw why. All along the road had been strewn splintered wood-shards and scattered belongings. Magazines of every variety fluttered on the ground like fallen petals, lending a surreal festive atmosphere to the entire scene.

Ai tugged at Yuri’s sleeve.

“Yuri-san, please stop the car...”

“No, it’s too dangerous.”

“But what if there are survivors...”

“It’s those who survive who pose the greatest threat to us.”

“No way...”

“... Strange. There is very little wreckage on the road itself. It feels as though we’re being led into a trap here...”

Ai stealthily shifted away from the front and moved to the back of the car, and began to whisper casually into Scar’s ear.

“Scar-san, are there any dead people here?”

“No; if there were I wouldn’t be able to stay put here like this.”

“... That’s true... Then, are there any of the living here?”

“About that I cannot tell. After all, we as Grave Keepers are only able to sense the nearby presence of the wandering or buried dead, as well as that of other Grave Keepers.”

Yuri could make neither head nor tail of this entire situation.

Without knowing whether it was just him being overly suspicious or whether they had already plunged into a trap, Yuri continued to drive the car forward.

They avoided scattered planks of wood and heaters, rolled over carpets, crushed ceramic cups, and so proceeded onward. All these objects that had no place on a road but inhabited it regardless numbered in the hundreds, fomenting a nightmarish tension that leavened and thickened the atmosphere.<sup>[7]</sup>

Steering around a lion statuette soaking in a bathtub of mud and making their way past a large broken-off washbasin, Yuri came upon the sight that he’d dreaded seeing all this time.

The road was blocked with a barricade of rubble.

Yuri saw the barricade and immediately gunned the accelerator.

The explosive acceleration threw them back into their seats and the car sprang toward the roadblock with a dizzying speed. Yuri turned the steering wheel in small, precise motions, making minute adjustments to the erratic motion of the car and steering it on a path towards the thinnest and most vulnerable part of the barricade.

A snapped bonsai, the shell of an oven, and a sign saying “Car Repairs and

Checkups” loomed before them— And the car punched right through.

The impact shook the car roughly, but it came out on the other side intact. Splinters of wood painted red, white, and yellow danced up into the sky, and a great number of toilet bowls lifted up briefly before smashing back onto the ground.

It was then that Ai saw the figures of people among the ruin. A group of gun-wielding men had appeared and were shouting at their car, the younger and more hotheaded among them even taking aim and opening fire. Their shots veered far and missed on every occasion. Yuri accelerated to throw the gunmen off and the street quickly disappeared from their sight, to be replaced again by the wilderness. The blue colored car continued at its highest speed toward the horizon.

\*

The car traveled west until the sky became streaked with red; in the end, despite Yuri’s earlier promises of lodging in town they would had to camp after all. Taking advantage of the last remaining rays of sunlight, they hurriedly put up a tent. Ai would be bedding with Scar, while Kiriko and Yuri seemed to have planned to sleep on the front and back seats of the car.

They started a fire just as the sun set using wood that had gotten stuck under the engine cover when they crashed through the barricade. They’d built it just so that its east-side was covered by the car, so that nobody from the town would see their light.

“How is it?”

“Not good. The suspension is broken.”

Kiriko climbed back out from under the car, saying this.

The car had started becoming faulty from the moment they crashed into the barricade. It would shake wildly when in motion, and when they hit potholes the impact would vibrate uncushioned right up through to the passengers.

But they couldn't have stopped there anyway. The blue car had driven on, and smoke had finally begun to issue from the engine not long ago.

"I've just about managed to fix it over on my side."

Yuri went over to the back and checked the engine, staining both his hands black in the process. Sawdust from the wood had entered the car's vents and disrupted the cooling system which, along with the motor oil leaking from all the shaking, had started a flame in the engine.

"But we still have to make proper repairs soon, or we'll be in trouble."

Ai took some bread, dried meat, and tea to the two who's just finished their work, and they all gathered around the fire eating ravenously.

"Let's go to Ortus, then."

Yuri spoke as he sipped on his tea.

"... Indeed, it looks as if we have no other choice."

Kiriko, after swallowing a mouthful of bread, gave his assent.

"I can help you organize free repairs and lodging. That should be possible."

"That would be a great help. But is it okay for you to do that?"

"The city has always had a principle of rescuing to travelers in need, so it should be fine to give you a little more aid. But I can't guarantee it for sure..."

"That's more than enough. Thanks a lot."

"..."

"..."

Ai was unusually quiet.

"Ai, are you okay? You haven't spoken for a while."

Except for when she was eating, her mouth, normally so lively and wild with a never ending stream of words, stayed shut. And of course she had finished dinner much quicker than everyone else; her mug of tea, too, she had finished early on.

"Yuri-san..."

Ai's face was illuminated by the flickering light of the fire as she spoke.

"Isn't there any way to help those people back there..."

With a pained<sup>[8]</sup> expression, Yuri shook his head.

"We can't."

He left no room for argument. What he'd said was not that they wouldn't help them but that they couldn't, making him seem even more resolute on this matter.

"But..."

"You want to know why? Of all the reasons there are, the first is the most basic one of all: we don't have anything to help them with."

After all, a hundred people homeless just wasn't a problem a mere few could solve.

"Second of all, they've already become bandits. Third, they've already found a way to survive. That second reason is their very means of survival. And in any case, while it wouldn't do them much good, surely they've got at least one car or motorcycle in the whole of that town. Kiriko, am I right?"

Hearing this question from Yuri, the hitherto silent Kiriko nodded his head.

"... There should be cars in their emergency underground garages... And they should still be able to contact other towns or villages... The only reason they haven't said anything to Ortus is probably that they don't want to rely on that city even if it means trusting to luck..."

"Were they the ones who kidnapped you?"

Kiriko hugged his knees and chewed on a fingernail, casting his mind into an ocean of thought.

"... Now that I think about it, there doesn't seem to be any other possibility but this."

Blue flame shrouded from view the burning charcoal, and in Kiriko's somber eyes glowed a quiet superiority.

"They probably wanted to take me as a hostage to use as a bargaining chip..."

These living people are just completely unfathomable. To think we had given them help on many occasions before, and they not only neglect to thank us, but repay our kindness with enmity.”

“... A conflict between two towns, is it?”

“Not a conflict, they're just raising a ruckus on their end.”

“Wouldn't it be nicer if you could all live in harmony?”

“... That's what I think too.”

The two sighed in unison.

“Well, this way Ortus will soon hear of the town, and I'm certain they'll find some way to help. We don't have to worry about this.”

“Hmmm...”

“What, are you still not happy about this? And besides, it's not as if you're bound to them by blood, so why would you want to help them out?”

“Well, that's because...”

Yuri immediately felt his body stiffen, and he tried surreptitiously to make Ai stop talking.

“That's because I am a champion of justice.”

“... What?”

Bemused, unable to comprehend what that declaration was supposed to mean, Kiriko glanced at Yuri. He was muttering embarrassedly to himself, “She actually said it...”

“If people are in trouble in the west, we'll go help them out; if people are making trouble in the east, we'll go teach them a lesson! That's what my journey of world salvation is about.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes—Hey, you know, it's been three days since the journey began.”

“That's short! So you've only really just started on it!”

“That's why I want to go help them out...”

Ai pulled her legs close to herself and rested her chin on her knees, looking as melancholy as someone of her size and age could get.

“Hmm...”

Kiriko propped his face up with a hand. The handcuffs clamped uselessly around his wrist jangled with a harsh noise.



“—What a foolish dream.”

“H-how could you call it that...”

“Am I wrong? I won’t even ask you your reasons for having so ridiculous a dream... But I’ll tell you now, having an unachievable dream is in the end just chasing the wind.

“...”

“No matter how big your dreams are, no matter how much you want to do, right now you’re still powerless to see them through.”

“I know that...”

“They won’t expect you to help them either, and think of some way by themselves.”

“Like I said, I know...”

It was because she knew all this that Ai was so pained, so melancholy.

“... I’ll go sleep now.”

Ai stood up.

She looked about her, saw only the night painted black and the sky bespeckled with stars.

“... I’m...”

The night was cold and large, seeming almost to swallow up their tiny fire.

“I’m really quite... small... aren’t I...”

There was a still, unmoving silence.

“... Well, you’re still a kid.”

“Indeed, still a kid.”

Ai aimed a kick at the two men’s legs and went into the tent.

### Part III[[edit](#)]

Nobody woke the others up, but by the time the sun had risen everyone was awake.

The thin layer of frost the wilderness had acquired over the night had already been swept away by the sunlight, and steam rose from the engine of their blue car to be assimilated into the lowlying clouds above them.

They put away the tent, cleaned up the fire, started the engine to warm it up.

After boiling water on a Primus stove, they had tea for breakfast and bread as well.

“Let’s go.”

They put their luggage into the car and got on. Ai popped a sweet into her mouth as makeshift medicine for carsickness.

She allowed the lemon-flavored sweet to slide left and right in her mouth before eventually stopping it on her tongue; and at the same time they prepared to leave. As the car's pre-warmed heart began to beat faster and faster, its sound languidly split apart the early morning air.

Ai sat in the back seat and seemed lost in thought about the steadily receding town.

She was thinking of how nice it would be if everyone could live in happiness.

\*

At around noon Kiriko took over the driving. Shocked, Ai had asked, "You can drive?!" and gotten as reply "As long as they can reach the pedals, anyone can." Kiriko hadn't meant anything in particular by this remark, but Ai was incensed by it and since then had lain on the middle seat trying to fall asleep.

The car had stopped once for lunch and thrice to cool down the overheating engine, and it was now a long time past noon.

The first to notice that something was amiss was Scar.

"I sense unburied dead."

"..... Whaa...? That's a really tasty cake you have there....."[\[9\]](#)

"Ai, please wake up."

Scar looked out from the back seat and said this quietly.

"... Huh? No, what do you mean, I wasn't asleep at all... Not at all... Ah, I didn't sleep yesterday either... Ooh..."

"I can sense unburied dead around; they're right where we're going."

"Huh?"

In order to bury the dead the Grave Keepers were endowed with various powers, one of which was the ability to sense the presence of the dead. They had many ways of knowing who and where were those that they had to bury. But the

criteria for “people they had to bury” was hopelessly complicated, such that while most Grave Keepers would go for the nearest dead, exceptions abounded and some were even to this regard a little faulty. For instance, Ai had no such power. And in fact it was said that even among pure Grave Keepers there were those who could go in circles around the dead and never find them. But it was precisely because of this tendency of Grave Keepers to be attracted to the dead that they were sometimes called ‘Lords of the Cadavers’.

Back to the travelers.

Ai stared ahead.

Logically speaking, Ortus lay in that exact direction.

“... Here we go again... Then, Scar-san, how many of them are there? One? Two? Ten? A hundred?”

“At the very least... a million, I think.”

“I see, a million... Wait, a million?!”

Ai looked again to the front as she exclaimed this. The cloudless horizon suddenly seemed threateningly ominous, making her feel as if their continued driving forward was an act of utmost idiocy.

“There’re probably even more than that... It’s just that they’re all packed too close together, so I can’t detect their numbers with any accuracy.”

“That’s accurate enough! Kiriko-san, stop! Stooooooooop!”

“Huh? What? What is it?”

“What do you mean, what is it! There’re over a million of the dead where we’re going...”

“But of course.”

Kiriko didn’t seem to mind this at all, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“After all, where I live is the Land of the Dead, the world’s greatest city of departed souls. Ortus.”

## Part IV[\[edit\]](#)

Ortus was a city that covered the vast hills it was built on.

Its coordinates were 48° 5' 2" N 109° 2' 58" (using the Elzargo [\[10\]](#) Meridian). Situated in the middle of the continent, its climate was cool and dry. It had a population of 1.2 million, all of whom were dead.

This state began as a nomadic monarchy with a history thousands of years old. Fourteen years ago, but a year after the world underwent its transformation, it shaped itself into an organized band of the dead and set about its business, even surviving the armed persecutions by the living and repelling countless Grave Keepers to grow and grow in size and number.

And finally, nine years ago, they had built on this earth the city they had long dreamed of.

This city that had begun with a mere twenty thousand grew larger and larger in the blink of an eye. Its succession of kings swept their formidable gaze far and wide, including into the town its every member; then, as if knowing the part they played was over, they handed rulership to the town and to the people, and abdicated swiftly and with little fuss.

All except for one particular princess.

Like a machine gun, Kiriko had rattled off all this history at being asked about Ortus. He'd sounded very excited, adding to every event comments such as "In the battle with Masaud the fallen enemies all defected and joined us, which had a tremendous impact on the outcome" or "It's quite a miracle for the still-nomadic people of Ortus to have envisioned what exists today" or "You should have seen the king when he gave up his power. He privately invoked never-before-used delegated authority [\[11\]](#) to create a Declaration of Human Rights that nobody at the time supported, in an act thrilling enough to get your heart pumping."

Ai missed most of it, absorbed as she was in gazing at the wall that loomed over them.

Ortus was a walled city, and its walls formed the barrier that divided the world of the dead and the world of the living. Its tall walls of sturdy red brick yielded no entry from without to Grave Keepers nor escape from within to any of its people.

To the right, an endless stretch of red brick. To the left, too, an endless stretch of red brick.

Ai began to feel a little frightened.

But the car paid no heed to her demurral and coasted crisply to the doors.

The great doors had to be opened with a gigantic winch. On their surface was inscribed a dense sprawl of spells and glyphs to repel evil, while scores of gargoyles scowled row upon row out at the wilderness.

“... These doors look quite scary, don’t they.”

“Ah, I can’t deny that... I’m getting goosebumps too.”

On the doors were collected curse and hex and charm and jinx that spanned the whole immensity of time, making it seem like the very gates of Hell.

“... They’re mixing too many meanings here: gate, spell, warning to outsiders, and also memorial...

“Memorial?”

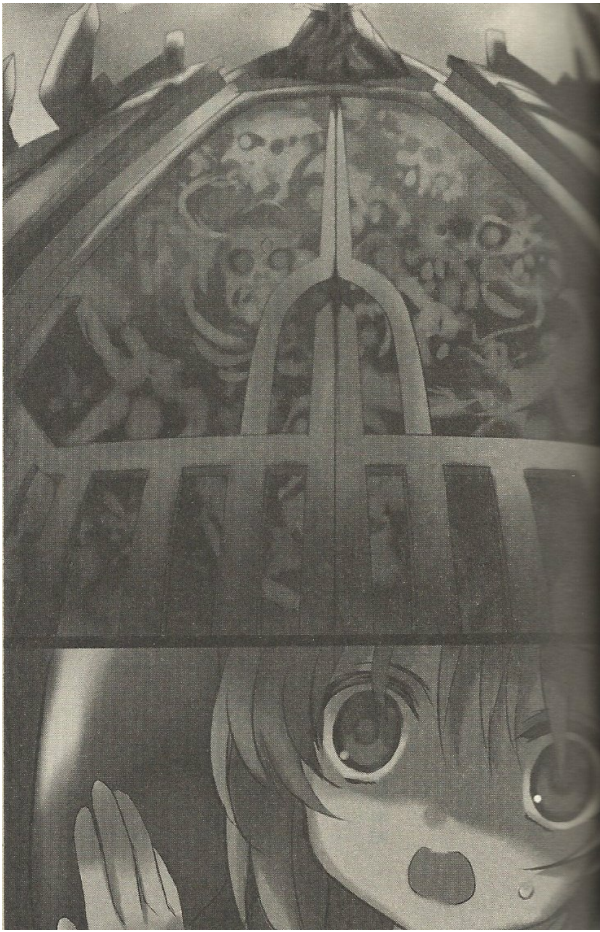
“... Yeah, for Grave Keepers.”

“...”

“Don’t forget that this city is also a giant tomb. Ortus has over a million dead residing in it, so Grave Keepers make their way here from every direction... These Grave Keepers here were all killed by soldiers; but still, even though they could never scale these walls no matter how great their ability, they kept coming and coming...”

The car was enveloped in awkwardness.

Kiriko seemed also to notice that the atmosphere was off, and he pointed to a corner of the doors.



“Look over there.”

At the very crown of the doors was a beautifully made figurehead just like one on a ship, arm spread and singing to the world, smiling a warm and gentle smile.

“Is that the ‘Your Majesty’, then?”

“Ah, no... That is...”

Koroshiohake. [\[12\]](#)

On the figurehead was carved these words.

“That name gives me the shivers...”

“... She is the guardian deity of Ortus, possessed of the ability to kill all life.”

“As if the name alone wasn’t enough...”

“That can’t be helped,” Kiriko said in a low voice.

“... After all, the history of Ortus is one filled with persecution and suffering... Everyone here wants a god like this.”

There was more carved on the statue.

*Her eyes are the eyes of death. Her words are the words of death. Her being*

*overflows with death; no life shall escape her reach. No life shall escape Koroshiohake's reach.*

*I am Lord of all men, wielding Nirvana's divine harvest to smite outsiders. [\[13\]](#) I am Protector of the world's dead.*

"A god of the dead... Never heard of it before."

"Well, that's to be expected, given that the gods of the past existed only for the living. Unfair, don't you think? That's why Koroshiohake chose alone to become the guardian goddess of the dead. She's a kind goddess..."

"... That's true."

"Those she has killed she comes to protect. It's all in perfect order."

"What, like an arms merchant stirring up war? [\[14\]](#) That's not right!"

The car had reached the doors as they said this, and Kiriko parked the car on a shoulder. Before them was a small guard post built of the same brick as the walls, bearing on its entrance the sign "Ortus East Gate Watch".

"All right. Please give me a moment."

Kiriko got off the car, and a few of the guards standing at watch immediately hurried over to have him fill in some documents.

Ai watched them from the side seat. The guards wore uniforms of deep blue, carried rifles on their shoulders, and wore over their faces expressionless visors of steel.

"Scar-san, are they... all of them... are they all..."

"Dead."

The guards seemed to know Kiriko: they slapped him on the back and exchanged jokes with him.

The existence of the dead seemed a fact normal beneath mention.

"Ai, I want to bury them."

"Just for now, please control yourself!"

"All right. Then, when does this 'for now' end?"

Ai, too, was trying to work out when that was.

When would it be the time to bury that man there rejoicing at the safe return of his countryman?

When would it be the time to bury the million souls behind this great wall?

“... It ends when I say it ends.”

“I see.”

Scar had replied simply. Soon afterwards, Kiriko returned to the car.

“It’s done. Follow me.”

They got of the car in a row and followed behind Kiriko as he led them into the guard post.

It didn’t look so much like a place for defence as it did an office, with a counter in the middle presumably being used for enquiries.

Kiriko, glancing cursorily at the counter, caught a glimpse of someone’s face and a surprised “Oh” slipped from his mouth.

Upon seeing Kiriko, the person leaped up from a chair and greeted him enthusiastically.

“Kiriko-kun!”

“Kiriko-chan! It’s good to have you back safe and sound!”

Saying this, the person vaulted the counter and dashed at Kiriko to envelop him in a hug. Exasperated, Kiriko tried to dodge but was in the end wrapped in an embrace so tight he couldn’t extricate himself from it.

“W-what’re you doing here in a place like this?”

“What’s this attitude, Kiriko-kun? To think we were all that worried about you.”

That was from the woman who, from the perspective of the travelers, was situated on the left.

“Exactly, Kiriko-chan! Are you hurt? Is your virginity intact? I had so much trouble keeping this from the princess, you know.”

And that was from the man who was situated on the right. The two finally released Kiriko from their embrace.

Ai looked blankly at what was going on before her.

The woman on the left seemed to notice Ai's gaze and turned to grin at her.

"Kiriko-kun, are these the ones who saved you? If you don't mind, could you introduce them to us?"

Saying this, the two stepped forward. Kiriko cast an anxious glance at Ai, muttering to himself, "I hope this goes well..."

Ai, indeed, was frozen in shock.

"Everyone, this is the deputy captain of the Ortus Imperial Guard, Pox."

The woman on the left flashed them a wink. She looked to be between twenty five and thirty, her face was pale, and her figure, while slim, was clearly accustomed to exercise and showed no weakness.

"And this is the special foreign affairs ambassador, Rex."

The man on the right told them "Pleased to meet you" and broke into a smile. He was a little short of stature, just about as tall as the woman, and his figure, while equally thin, was muscled and so gave off an impression of healthful vigor.

The two were similar in height and wore the same shirt, trousers, and deep blue coat. There didn't seem to be anything strange about them.

Nothing strange about them at all.

Except that they were far too close together.

"Uh... Say something, could you please?"

That was from the left.

"Hey, Pox, they're probably all scared of the way you look, y'know."

And that was from the right.

"How rude, Rex. It's clear that it's your face that's scaring them speechless."

The two began a heated argument at a zero-distance range.

Because the two people were one.

This man-woman was separated right down the middle, with the right half being a woman and the left half being a man.

“E-Excuse me...”

Ai plucked up her courage and addressed the two.

“H-how... did the two of you end up like this?”

“Well, that’s obviously because we ran into each other from opposite directions at a super fast speed, and with a snap and a bang and a thunderbolt clang we were fused together...”

“Rex, don’t go pulling their leg. But, miss, I’m afraid I’ll have to apologise, because I can’t tell you how.”

Pensively, the right half muttered something unclear to himself.

“Ah, no... I should be begging your pardon... My name is Ai Astin.”

Ai instinctively stretched out her right hand and, with a somewhat surprised expression, Pox took it. It was only after she’d withdrawn her hand, shake over, that Ai remembered she’d missed something. She stuck out her left hand.

“Nice to meet you, Rex-san.”

“Miss, please forgive my having use my left hand.”

When the three had shaken hands, Yuri and Scar followed suit and introduced themselves.

This two-person group crossed their arms in a lively manner.

“Aren’t these people nice?”

Then they patted Kiriko on the back.

“Most of the time even the dead can’t stand us, going so far as to call us ‘monsters’.”

“There is no such thing as a monster in this world.”

Ai was resolute as she said that.

“No matter how strange they seem in mind or body, people are people, and that’s all there is.”

“... Ohhhh.”

Pox suddenly made a strange noise and seemed about to fall over; it was only through Rex’s support from the left that they stayed upright.

“H-hey, partner, are you okay?!”

“Damn... This girl is so cute!”

Pox’s eyes glowed with a sudden light and her voice became louder and more excited. Rex, on the other hand, seemed to droop and wore on his face a fed up expression. To have the same body express such disparate emotions was quite enough to make any viewer feel as paradoxical as if they were looking at an optical illusion.

“Ah, I just love it when kids say smart things like that! Ahh... This is... so... cute... How am I going to deal with these feelings now...”

Rex told her to “Just dig a hole and bury them in there”, but Pox didn’t seem to hear. Dragging a reluctant left side along, the right side alternately patted Ai’s head and hugged her with all her strength.

“If there’s anything you need just say so; and you’re Kiriko’s saviors too, so we’ll do it even if it puts us through trouble. Looks like you’re not merchants; do you need fuel? Food? Whether you need repairs or spare parts or a doctor we’ve got it covered, so just leave it to us.”

At that, the right side pointed to the left’s face.

“Don’t underestimate her for just having just half a face: this scary mug of hers holds quite a lot of influence, so whatever you request of her she’ll get done for sure.”

“... Hey, buddy, for someone who’s not going to help you sure are being generous here...”

Hearing this, Ai addressed the two.

“In that case, I want to go inside Ortus.”

At that, both the two-person group and Kiriko froze.

But the most obvious reaction was Yuri’s.

“Excuse us for a minute.”

Pulling Ai by the collar with his right hand and waving at Scar to follow with his left, the three gathered in a corner and held a hushed discussion.

“Ai.”

“What is it?”

“Why do you want to go inside Ortus?”

“Huh? I’d like to ask you, Yuri-san, aren’t you planning on going in?”

“Do I even have to tell you?”

Yuri’s voice sank even quieter.

“You’ve seen that door, haven’t you? If they find out that they’re a Grave Keeper, who knows what’ll...”

“As long as we don’t tell them they won’t find out.”

That wasn’t far wrong: at the very least, Grave Keepers weren’t much different from humans in their appearance.

“... Even so, we should avoid danger as much as possible.”

“Even if it’s dangerous...”

Ai spoke in a firmer tone.

“Even if it’s dangerous, I want to take a look at this country. Knowing that there exists another city of the dead besides my village, I have to see it with my own eyes no matter what you say.”

Her green eyes gazed with fiery intensity at Yuri.

“And if you don’t want to go in, that’s fine by me. I’ll go by myself if I have to.”

“... It was because I knew this would happen that I didn’t want to come here.”

Yuri sighed.

“... You won’t change your mind?”

“I won’t.”

“Is that so... Well, this is after all your journey. We’ll listen to you.”

Yuri then asked Scar what she was going to do.

“It’ll only be more dangerous if you followed us in. If it’s possible, I’d like to have you wait in a different town.”

“No, I must go in as well.”

Since they rarely saw her so determined, both Ai and Yuri were a little surprised at this.

“Scar-san, even if you go in you can’t bury any of the dead. You know this, right?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Huh? Then, why...”

“There’s a voice calling me...”

“What?”

“Someone in there’s calling out to me...”

As Scar said this she pointed her gaze up towards the city of Ortus.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Ai and Yuri looked at one another a little helplessly, and began conversing in even quieter voices.

“... Is it that she’s tired?”

“... I don’t know, she doesn’t look tired at all to me.”

“... Do you think she’ll be alright in there...”

They turned to look at Scar, who was still staring dazedly into the distance.

“... Never mind. Damn it, everyone’s acting on some strange reason of their own here.”

Yuri held his head in frustration. Since he’d brought this troop out and about this action of his had become increasingly familiar, and he’d more or less come to perfect it.

“Let’s go.”

“You’re fine with it?”

“That doesn’t have much to do with this now, does it?”

The three returned to the counter with Yuri striding in the front.

“... Is your meeting over?”

“Hurry up, will you? We’re all bored to death here.”

The two-person group were cracking jokes about them.

“Then, about your desire to enter Ortus, could you tell us your reasons for it?”

“We want to do some tourism.”

Yuri answered in a completely defeated manner.

“Ah, so that’s was it was. I see. We’ll permit you.”

His reply was crisp and simple.

“What, that was it?”

“Aw, you didn’t like how quick it went?”

“Ah, this way, won’t your scary face be wasted? Kiriko, what do you say?”

The two-person group cracked up in laughter as Kiriko, displeased, replied:

“... You’ve all seen it. Ortus is a city of the dead, so there are limits on the entry of the living... Normally, only ambassadors and the wealthiest of merchants are allowed in... There’s never been a single living person who’s gotten an entry permit just with a reason as facetious as tourism...”

“Eh? Then, why...”

“Because we want to thank you! Didn’t we say that already?”

Pox and Rex stood up straight at attention.

“Here we once more express our gratitude to you. Thank you for saving Kiriko.”

“Representing his guardians, we offer you our deepest thanks.”

The two-person group bowed their heads low.

“We did say that we’d go to any trouble to accommodate your wishes, but we never thought you’d ask to enter Ortus. Well, you’ll have to fill in some forms first.”

“Uh, where are the entry permit forms again? Heyyy, Kiriko, tell me.”

The two-person team began talking to themselves in this fashion as they went over to the counter, pulled out from a drawer a couple dozen sheets of paper, and handed it to the three. Opening a bottle of ink and readying a pen each, they began to write with both hands operating under the control of different brains, and moving in a peculiar rhythm that no musician would ever be able to mimic.

At the end Ai took up a card exchanged for three sets of signatures, on which was printed her name, age (it said that she was fifteen, which was obviously a lie), hair color, and eye color.

Seeing the card was enough to make her feel inexplicably happy.

And on the middle of the card was written today’s date and the date they would have to leave Ortus.

“Seven days; that should be enough.”

Ai didn’t know, when it came to staying in cities, whether this length of time was a long one or not.

“All right, the procedures are complete. In that case—”

Rex snapped his fingers, put both hands on the counter, and swept his gaze over the travelers arrayed before him. Pox then raised her right hand and placed it over her heart.

In perfect unison, the two bent forward in a bow and said:

“Welcome to Ortus.”

## Translation Notes[[edit](#)]

1. [↑](#) The original Japanese names are (furigana and romaji in brackets): "キリコ (Kiriko)...悪疫 (ポックス/pokkusu) ...強攻 (レックス/rekkusu) ...紅雪 (ディーヴァ/diiva)...故国 (おりアス/oriasu)...節儉 (ヴェルエラ/veruera)...ウル (uru)...ヘリ

オス(heriosu)...メルザ(meruza)...ゴーク(googu)...ディグ(digu)", and then "アマ  
タ(amita)...バース(baazu)...ゲイオウツフ(geiouffu)...エルセスポフ  
(erusesupofu)...セツツアフーワ(settsafuuwa)"

2. [↑](#) Literally, translated as “chased away”.
3. [↑](#) Literally, translated as “transcendent”.
4. [↑](#) The actual phrase used here, 大眼瞪小眼, literally means “a big eye staring at a small eye”, but as an idiom translates to “two people looking at each other, not knowing what to do”. I’ve translated this pun as best I can with a pun on “seeing eye to eye” and “agreeable”.
5. [↑](#) Actually a “red fox” in the Chinese
6. [↑](#) There’s another pun here, 井水不犯河水, which literally means “well water and river water don’t get in each other’s way”, and refers to people or objects minding their own business and ignoring one another.
7. [↑](#) The verb that I translated as “foment” is more accurately translated as “ferment” or “brew”. “Leaven” is also absent in the Chinese
8. [↑](#) At how difficult it would be to deal with Ai.
9. [↑](#) What Ai actually says is “That’s really...” before breaking into unintelligible mumbling.
10. [↑](#) Original text エルザルゴ / eruzarugo.
11. [↑](#) Legal term: authority given to a party, in this case the king, that they normally wouldn’t have.
12. [↑](#) Translated to “Death Incarnate” in the Chinese text.
13. [↑](#) Chinese text: 持彼岸之暴利撃打外來者; I’m not sure if my translation is perfect as 暴利 translates to “windfalls”.
14. [↑](#) The expression in the Japanese text is マッチポンプ – Wasei-eigo meaning “someone who stirs up trouble to profit from it”.

# Chapter 2 - Dragons

## Chapter 2: Dragons[\[edit\]](#)

### Part I[\[edit\]](#)

They passed through the gate.

The view of the city was released from behind the red city walls, and its wide expanse suddenly spread forth for the travelers' eyes.

Before them was sun, castle, mountain and unending green.

There was wheat, still young and green, planted on what little flat ground there was that reached to the mountains. The wheat there looked to be faster-growing than the mountain variety Ai was accustomed to: from their color, they seemed nearly ready to sprout grains.

A couple of farmers sat on a ridge, watching their crops.

Ai could predict very clearly what adults like them talked about at times like this. They would resume for the umpteenth time conversations already dried and tasteless, like "They're growing well this year," "Yeah."

The travelers' eyes had long since become accustomed to the grey of the wilderness, so, faced now with this sudden assault of green, their surroundings seemed to them impossibly bright and gaudy.

A farmer suddenly noticed their presence and waved at them, and the rest followed suit. Ai rubbed her eyes and gave a small wave in return.

The car moved slowly, but eventually they shook off the farmers and continued onward.

After a while, as the sun reddened behind the mountain range, the travelers arrived at the foot of the hills.

Any further and they would reach the market. All the buildings before them had been converted into apartment flats, with the ground floor composed

entirely of shops bustling with the in-and-out flow of customers.

The whole of the Ortus market was in fact built of rock, with marble and clay and brick and the like having been combined together to form the compact apartments that fitted snugly together and packed the already narrow streets full, close to bursting.

The road had been maintained in excellent condition, with large and comfortable spots to rest all along its side. Households all but competed with one another in adorning their doors and windows with budding greenery and arraying the flowers of the season in other prominent locations. Just before their eyes was an elderly lady changing her potted plants on the roadside. Children ran past them in packs like gusts of wind, laughing as only they can, while along the road wizened old men blew with their pipes streams of colorful smoke and cast bets on little games of dice.

Everyone was, of course, dead.

The dead looked like they'd stripped off old clothes, with their muscles withered and dried and some thin as a wire. The younger the dead in question were, the stranger they looked.

Skeletons parading about in three-piece suit and tie. Coolies with chains coiled about themselves to make up for missing body weight. Women so wrapped up in lace they looked to have been melded into some strange sartorial beast, youths who'd amputated their limbs and replaced them with prosthetic ones, looking like puppets, college students [\[1\]](#)carrying library books under one arm and their heads under the other.

Most of the living treated these dead as monsters. They would react to such sights in much the same way: to think of the streets of Ortus as a devil-infested hell and say, frightened, that they shouldn't have come here, then arrange for a speedy departure. This sort of thing had happened so many times that Kiriko had already given up being outraged at it.

But Ai was different.

She pressed her face glumly to the car window and watched the faces of the people they passed. She didn't even stir at their appearance which so shocked

others, instead watching only their eyes.

Unnatural or ordinary, strange or familiar, the faces of the dead all wore smiles. As Ai watched, they joked and talked and chatted and laughed with the people close to them, and on their faces were the smiles of the everyday.

A mother with a baby turned and beamed at Ai, and she waved and smiled back, a pure smile without the barest shred of surprise, pity or rage in her expression.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

Kiriko, thinking that he'd just witnessed something forbidden to him, hurriedly turned his gaze back forward. Up ahead, in the sky that had donned its night colors, he saw a star the same color as the tear, scattering light down on the city.

At the same time there came a "Wow..." from behind as Ai, too, saw the same scene.

\*

It was dark when they arrived at their hotel. By that time, even the car's gears had begun acting up, and they'd ascended the hill with difficulty, relying on only a single flickering headlamp to steer themselves into the car-park.

The appearance of the hotel was rather different from the apartments on the streets below, being a tall construct built of rock. All around them, there wasn't a single building in sight, making it seem as though the hotel had been isolated from the din of the market.

The car park was unfamiliar to the travelers, as, rather than paving, the ground was just compressed earth. They took their luggage from the car and went over to the building. The moon was full, or very near it, and it lit up the night for the travelers below.

"This was a school an year ago."

Kiriko pointed out the features of their residence as they walked. That there was the car-park, the male dormitories opposite to it, the female ones on that side over there, and here the school building, shut and locked.

“Right...”

Ai was spiritless in her response.

“...Let me just say something first.”

Seeing Ai like that, Kiriko was spurred on to say the words he'd been deliberating over a while ago.

“Thank you for saving me. I'm very grateful for it...but I don't think you should stay in here. Ortus is a city of the dead, a city belonging only to the dead, and the living have no business coming in just to fool around. If it were up to me...I would not have permitted you entry.”

“Oh... Then why...why did you still let us in...?”

“It wasn't up to me! I couldn't have defied my superiors like that!”

“Ah... Is that...so...?”

Ai didn't even seem to be listening to him. Kiriko's mouth tightened into a line.

“I hope you'll leave soon after finishing your business here.”

“...Huh, you're not making any sense, Kiriko-san...”

Dwarfed by the luggage she carried, Ai swayed unstably as she walked.

“...What did you say?”

“Aren't you living as well?”

Kiriko kept his mouth shut.

“...Kiriko-san...that's...funny...”

“...Ai?”

Something was wrong with her.

She rocked left and right as though rowing a boat, tripped, and fell to her right.

“Ai!”

Kiriko reached out and caught her in the nick of time.

“So much has happened today that her brain’s probably tired out.”

Yuri took Ai’s rucksack and slung it over his shoulder. Weight removed, Ai slumped down and fell asleep, looking as contented as a well-fed baby.

“...I’m sorry, Kiriko, but could you carry her on your back?”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

The moment Kiriko presented his back to her, Ai twined her arms around his neck and fell unconscious. Kiriko clasped her legs under his arms and got up with a low gasp, and only then did he stop to think “Why me?” But Ai was already on his back, and trying to hand her over to Yuri would just seem strange now.

Ai began to snore softly. Her face was entirely pale with exhaustion but for traces of red in the corners of her eyes.

“...Hey, Yuri-san.”

“What?”

“Ai... How old is she?”

At that time, Kiriko didn’t notice that he’d broken a rule.

“Who knows? You ask her yourself.”

Ai spoke up.

“...I told you I’m not asleep... Really... I’m...not...”

“What kind of person says that in their sleep?”

Kiriko adjusted Ai’s position on his back and walked toward their rooms.

## Part II[[edit](#)]

Morning was long past when Ai awoke.

She sat up wearily. She had no memory of the room she was currently in, nor any idea of her circumstances; but to these she paid no mind. She yawned

widely.

It was only after she had allowed the cells under her every tooth and beneath her tongue and even of her vocal cords to bask fully in the morning air that she shut her mouth and looked around her.

...Where was she?

The room was dim and unlit, but soft rays of sunlight slanted in from the windows and illuminated the specks of dust in the air.

She looked to her right and saw another bed, on the far side of which were a dressing table and a wardrobe put against the wall.

Not a sound penetrated the room from outside, imbuing it with a hushed atmosphere.

Slowly, Ai turned her half-opened eyes towards the left and swept her gaze across the room, seeing a door, bookcase, desk and chair arrayed in it.

Then, at the left wall...

She found a window with curtains drawn.

“...Shuuu...”

Moving as if she were swimming, Ai stepped off the bed and padded barefoot to the window.

The curtain was thick and kept the room dim, but the sunlight contrived to shine around it and into the room. The curtain's edges glowed with the passing light. Floating particles of dust were set sparkling by the light falling on Ai's toes.

She drew it open.

The light that shone in was strong enough to hurt even when she squinted her eyes shut. Warmth flooded through every corner of her body, scorching away the dazed drowsiness that had occupied her head just a moment ago.

Ai looked out over Ortus.

“Wow...”

Unthinkingly, she stretched out her hand, lifted up the latch and pulled the window open. The wind that blew in set Ai's bangs fluttering along with the

curtains, and she squealed in delight, resting on the frame and leaning her body half out of the window.

The road stretching from left to right before her was fully paved with white tiles that shone beneath the sun's light. As Ai turned her gaze down across the city, she saw the green of the wheat fields and, further ahead, the red bricks of the city walls.

And to the right, she could see a dark colored castle, built into the tall hillside.

Unable to contain her excitement, Ai pushed herself back into the room and almost stumbled backward in her haste. Recovering, she then spun toward the wardrobe with the leftover momentum. She threw it open with the same energy with which she had opened the window and saw her coats hanging neatly there along with her culottes. [\[2\]](#)

She suddenly realized that she didn't know what clothes she was wearing. She looked down, and saw the shirt and underwear that she normally wore.

And she began to wonder, quite naturally, who it was who had gotten her changed.

Probably not Kiriko, she thought. As for Yuri...that was quite possible, but she couldn't tell whether the one who'd changed her clothes was the uncaring traveler or the father taking care of his daughter.

That left Scar. She would be the best of her companions.

"...Ai?"

Ai heard Scar's voice from behind just as she was thinking about her. She turned around and saw her lying on the other bed.

"Scar-san! It's time to get up! Good morning!"

"...No, it's already noon."

"Eh?"

With her enthusiastic greeting met by a dispirited reply, Ai pulled out her pocket watch from inside the coat and checked the time. The hour hand pointed at twelve.

It was then she noticed that the sun did seem rather high up in the sky.

“Scar-san...why didn’t you wake me up...?”

“...I did...”

And so her question of blame was met by an answer of even greater blame.

Scar told Ai that both she and Yuri had tried to wake her, but she’d been too deeply asleep to be roused.

“...To think you managed to sleep all the way till noon... You have me impressed.”

A little apologetically, Ai scratched her head and asked the question that had preoccupied her a moment ago—“Was it you who helped me undress?”—and Scar replied with a “Yes.” Good.

“...Ai, you’re always so lively, aren’t you...”

Ai looked more closely at Scar, and only then saw that she seemed drained somehow, dressed only in a shirt and even now in bed, curled up beneath the covers.

“What happened? Are you too lazy to wake up as well, Scar-san? Or did you eat too much last night?”

“...How do you say it? Is this the feeling called sadness?... Ai, please do not group me with you in your mannerisms and behaviors.”

Ai walked across the floorboards to the bed, held her forehead to Scar’s to see if she was feverish. She wasn’t, and she didn’t look particularly ill either.

“Do you feel unwell?”

“...My chest hurts. My head hurts too, and I feel sick...”

“Right. Is it that voice from before—can you still hear it?”

“Yes...”

Scar turned away from Ai and looked directly in front of her.

“I wanted to find its source...”

“You mustn’t. Please stay here and rest.”

“Alright,” she returned obediently.

“...Now, what should I do? Do you need a doctor?”

“I don’t know...are there doctors who can treat Grave Keepers?”

“Aren’t there?”

“Who knows...”

“...Wait, Grave Keepers fall sick?”

“I’ve never heard of it happening before...”

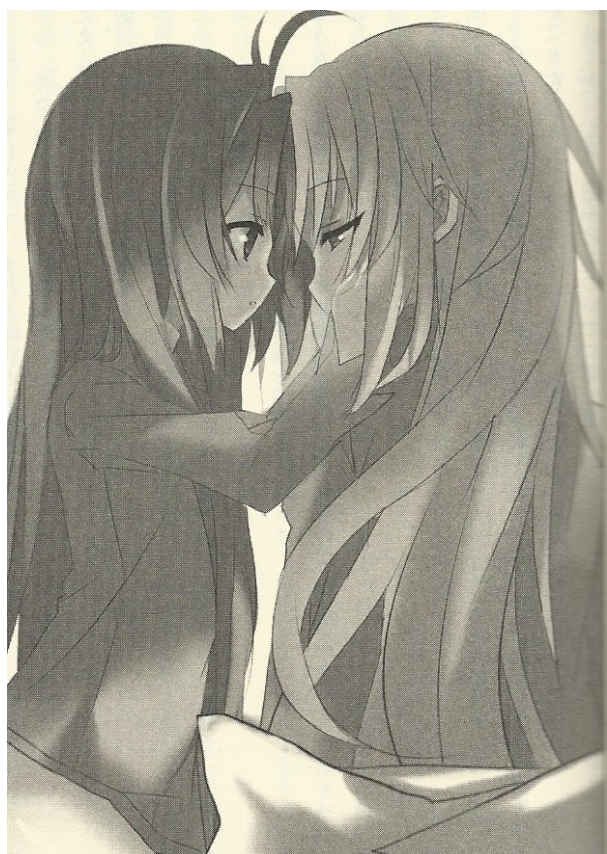
Ai came down with the flu once a year, but it didn’t seem like she’d be the best reference for Scar’s present condition.

“Yuri said that he’d buy some medicine on his way back, so I should just stay here like this...and wait and see if I get any better...”

“Ah, really? Yuri-san’s gone out?”

“Yes. He looked quite busy, having to go fix the car and replenish our supplies... Oh, he left a note.” Saying this, Scar handed a piece of paper folded in half to Ai.

On the note was written:



“Do not, under any circumstances, leave the hotel.”

Technically, that was a message conveyed through a myriad others. The ones like, “There are many dangerous people among the dead, so don’t leave the hotel,” or, “If you cause a ruckus, it’ll be almost impossible to clear up, so don’t leave the hotel,” were reasonable enough, but, “The air this season isn’t good on the throat,” was clearly just needless fussing. And, “Look out for cars,” was something you’d only say to a person *leaving* the house.

Ai folded the note into a paper airplane and flew it out of the window. Although the paper must have been heavy, soaked full as it was of that ramblingly incessant ink, on attaining freedom it flew high up into the blue Ortus sky.

“Scar-san.”

“...Yes?”

“Please answer my question honestly. Do you need looking after as you are?”

“No, not at all.”

Scar even waved a hand to emphasize the fact.

“If you stayed here, you’d only make it worse... Do you want to go get something to eat?”

“A-Aren't you being a little too forceful here...?”

Ai was a little hurt, but she nonetheless went and dressed herself. She pulled on her culottes and socks and did up her bootlaces, changed her shirt, tied her hair, set her straw hat on her head and swung on her coat.

She went over to the window.

“Should I close it?”

“...Yes, and the curtains too.”

Ai pulled the window closed and drew the curtains across.

“Well, I’ll be off for some food then.”

She stood by the door as she spoke.

She didn’t really need her hat and coat just for that, but Scar refrained from pointing it out to her.

Instead, just as Ai was hurrying out of the door, she called to her back-turned figure, “Did you bring your permit?”<sup>[3]</sup>

Ai’s embarrassment at that mistake was quite substantial indeed.

\*

Ai dashed out of the room, but naturally, she didn’t have the faintest idea of where she wanted to go.

She first headed to a corridor and, after peering left and right, found a staircase and descended to the first floor. Something told her that she couldn’t let herself be discovered, so she walked on tiptoes. With the floor plan at the first floor stairs, she found a place where there was water, and there washed her face and drank hugely to quench her thirst.

Signs of past students filled the dormitory building. There on the blackboard was still the name of a student punished with cleanup duty, and there in the umbrella stand was still stuck a baseball bat. The display cabinet placed beside the main doors still held dozens upon dozens of medals and trophies, while the lost-and-found box, long since been forgotten about, still held a blue notebook within, awaiting its master. Ai picked up the notebook and flipped through the pages.

“Actually, I *am* quite hungry after all.”

She announced this to the statue of some unknown notable situated between the second and third floor, and began searching more boldly through the dormitory building. Her plan was to find Kiriko or Yuri and get some food off them. Deciding to focus her search on the first floor, she spent her time running to peek at the front door, and heading to the janitor’s office to explore. A lot of things captured her interest on the way, but right now her primary objective was to find food to eat.

So Ai ran to check the canteen. She crossed the entire length of the room, peering with a baffled expression at the place where used bowls and plates were

collected.

And in the kitchen, a certain Keira Venna<sup>[4]</sup> saw all this as it went on.

“What’re you doing over there?”

Caught completely off-guard, Ai leaped up in fright and looked frantically around for the speaker.

“This way.”

Keira looked at Ai from over the counter that connected the kitchen and the canteen.

“N-Nice to meet you! My name is Ai Astin!”

“Hey. Nice to meet you too. I’m Keira Venna, the manager of this place and its cook.”

Ai stood at attention and summoned up a voice from the depths of her being.

“I-I just wanted to say, I didn’t have anything to do with the globe on the second floor falling down! It was already on the floor!”

“...So you’re confessing before anyone’s even asked you about it... You’re a funny kid.”

Keira disappeared back into the kitchen, and Ai was left standing there at a loss for a good while.

“Here.”

Keira returned and plonked a tray on the counter.

“Huh? What’s this for?”

“It’s for you. You're going to eat it or not?”

Ai stood on tiptoes to peek up at the tray, and found that it was laden with freshly baked bread and a thick, rich stew.

“Oh! Thanks for the food!”

She took the tray from the counter and scurried over to a nearby table, and began to dig in.

“That was great!”

Ai had finished the bread and stew in just a few mouthfuls, and now she was carrying the tray back into the kitchen.

“Um, Keira...you’re a really good cook...”

“Really? Well, thanks.”

Keira was sitting on a chair in the kitchen with a newspaper in front of her, and she didn’t even look up from it as she answered. She was solidly built and looked to be middle-aged, and her face always seemed to wear a slightly ironic smile.

Ai placed both hands on the counter and pushed herself up, so that she could see over it.

“I didn’t know the dead could cook so well, you know.”

Then the tray was off the counter and in the air, speeding towards her head. It connected. What shocked Ai the most as she stood there blinking in confusion wasn’t the pain of the impact, but rather that she couldn’t tell what was going on.

“Let me tell you, kid, 'You’re a really good cook' was fine by itself. You didn’t have to add that bit about the dead. D’you think that just because we’re dead doesn’t mean we’re not *allowed* to be good at cooking? How about we sit you down for a lecture from old Miss Keira here on cooking with science, and how we don’t need to use our senses for it, huh?”

“Ah—No—I meant—I’m really sorry!”

Ai, who had since fallen below the counter, had to push herself up again to deliver the apology.

Keira placed two cups in front of Ai, and the warm bitter fragrance of tea began to issue from them.

“Here. Have some.”

One cup was larger than the other. After giving it a little thought, Ai decided that it would be best to be polite, so she picked up the one that looked small enough to be part of a toy set.

“Blergh!”

The tea in it was concentrated to the point of being thick, and was both scalding hot and very bitter.

“Silly, that one’s mine.”

Keira lightly removed the cup from Ai’s hand and sipped at the dark-colored liquid within.

“You’ve never had dehva tea<sup>[5]</sup> before, right?”

Ai nodded a few times in response, and began sticking out her tongue experimentally. So bitter was the tea that even now she was unable to speak.

Dehva tea was a specialty of Ortus’. The first draft that the dead took was both thick and bitter. The second, the Living Blend, was made with the used leaves of the first and was therefore half as strong. That was the blend in the larger cup that was pushed toward Ai, and which she now raised carefully to her mouth.

Keira took care of Ai as if on a whim, returning occasionally to the kitchen to check on something that was cooking in the pot. It was during one of these times that Ai addressed Keira’s turned back.

“E-Excuse me!”

“What is it?”

“Do you know where Yuri-san and Kiriko-san went?”

“If it’s the tall one you want, he left right when morning broke.”

He’d said that he had to take the car to be checked and repaired. He’d also asked where the telegraph office and drugstore were, it looked like he’d be heading there as well.

“Kiriko’s probably at work, but he’ll be back by dusk.”

“Does Kiriko-san live here?”

“Yes... Oh, but if he’s gone to the castle, it might be nighttime before he returns.”

“The castle?”

“To see the princess.”

On hearing this, Ai was reminded of when she first met Kiriko, and he’d mistaken her for a princess.

“Kiriko-san knows the princess?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I heard the princess treats him like a friend. What, didn’t he ever tell you anything about it?”

“He only said that he had to run errands all over the city...”

“That’s what he does. When he’s here he runs errands for me, and when he’s at the castle he runs them for the princess.”

Ai was so impressed that, without really noticing it, she soon slurped up all of her tea.

She returned her teacup to the counter, thanking Keira for the tea as she did so.

Then she checked the clock. It was just noon then, and there was plenty of time left in the day.

But there was nothing for her to do in that time.

Ai rested her chin on the counter, alternately watching Keira as she worked and tilting her ear to listen to the clock as it ticked away the time.

This was the first time she hadn’t had anything to do since she left the village.

“Excuse me...”

Ai couldn’t stand it much longer.

“Excuse me, can I go out into the city?”

Keira’s face took on a pained expression.

“What did the tall one say?”

“He didn’t *say* anything at all.”

Well, he hadn’t.

“...Then I don’t have any reason to stop you. But be careful. Ortus has been closed for nine years now, and just about everyone’s forgotten how to behave

around living people like you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“But, Keira-san, you seem...perfectly normal to me.”

“I am a cook after all, so I get to see the living from time to time... Well, where’re you planning on going?”

“I saw this Mask Street on my way here yesterday, and I want to go take a look...”

“Ah, there’s good. Did you bring your permit?”

Ai flashed her new entry permit at Keira.

“If you get lost or need help, show this card to anyone nearby, preferably the ones in the shops. Also...hey, put this on.”

Keira took from a drawer an object completely incongruous with its surroundings, and handed it to Ai.

“A mask?”

“If you’re heading to Mask Street, then of course you’re going to need one of your own! Plus, you stand out a little too much, so this’ll help you blend in a bit more.”

Ai looked at the mask. It was shaped like a fox’s face and seemed filled with all the exciting mysteries of a different country, much like the group of dead they saw yesterday.

The smell of cardboard and glue flew up her nose.

“Does it look good on me?”

“Not bad, isn’t it? Let’s lower your hair now... Also, don’t wear that long coat of yours out, put on this jacket<sup>[6]</sup> instead.

Ai’s golden hair billowed down from her shoulders to her back, a yellow blanket wrapped around her body.

She looked for all the world like a straw-hatted golden fox.

“Not bad. Now go on, it’s your debut.”

Thoroughly enjoying this, Ai barked once at Keira.

Then, she dashed out to the noonday street.

### Part III[[edit](#)]

Cats, horses, *oni*, monkeys, eagles, dragons, weasels, cows, tigers, elephants, owls, men, faces dead, and faces living.

The street was packed with masks. Every wall of every building was covered and crowded with them, and not only the storeowners but shoppers strolling back and forth seemed to have grown a second face over their own. This was no fancy-dress party, and every person wore only the most normal clothes about, but their masks were so fantastical that the contrast lent the scene the surreal tint of a daydream.

Ortus had a great demand for masks.

Most of the dead modified their faces in some way or other. For the conservative, there was makeup; for the radical, facial reforming. There were many ways to be found for the dead to play with their appearances, and of them the simplest, and consequently most popular, was the use of masks.

To satisfy this need of the populace, on Mask Street shops had opened up selling masks of every shape and form, from street stalls for the inexpensive goods to luxury stores for bespoke tailoring.

The street was wide and rose on a gentle incline. Among customers here just for the masks were tourists, wandering about in search of fun, and numerous cafes had sprung up expressly for their patronage.

There, a corner off the street.

An alleyway opened off from the main road, and there a small fox crouched behind the mask stand of an abandoned stall.

As if out of its den for the first time, the fox peeked left and right from behind

the stall's sign. There was a green luster shining out from beneath the two slits of the mask, one which took anticipation and excitement and combined and doubled them into a wild synergistic mix within its owner. She stared out at the truth before her, that this almost violent swirl and flow of people, of a kind she'd never witnessed before, was composed entirely of the dead.

"Oi, Shorty."

As if unable to watch this any longer, a young lion from the neighboring stall addressed the fox.

"You're blocking the masks from view. If you're not here to shop, clear off."

The fox turned around. Her accoster was seated in front of a stall laden with the cheap kinds of masks seen everywhere else on the street, jostling for space on a rack already enlarged with the addition of a metal ladder. It looked to be just that sort of stall opened up by a craftsman yet to make it big, with mask quality varying wildly between low and high, and the amount sold depending more on how well the seller could exhort people to buy them than on how well they were made. Based on this standard, the lion's conduct probably wouldn't even warrant a pass. At the present moment he was sitting on a worn rug in front of the stall, so preoccupied with putting finishing touches on an unpainted mask in his hands that he ignored passing customers one and all. His words to the fox were, clearly, quite unmeant.

The fox stayed as she was, watching the lion; then she suddenly dashed out from the stand, not away as the lion expected but towards him, stopping and sitting herself down at his side.

"...Oi."

"Ah—no—then—I'll leave right away, it's just...I'm a bit tired..."

It was only upon hearing this that the lion looked up from his hands and had a proper look at the fox's mask.

His eyes widened beneath wooden slits.

"Oi, fox, where'd you get your hands on this mask?"

"This? It's not mine. Keira-san lent it to me."

“...Ah, was that it? I see.”

Mystery solved, the lion nodded few self-satisfied times to himself and continued on with his work, ignoring the fox seated beside him.

The fox breathed a sigh of relief at having been allowed to stay here, and wiped at beads of perspiration which had formed beneath her mask.

She was exhausted.

Ai had seen so very many new and interesting things today, and now she was content to ease her tired eyes and sit with her knees hugged to her chest, experiencing the floodlit chatter of the world around her with only her ears. There was one sound constant among the hubbub, the rough scraping of knife on wood as the lion started carving yet another mask. In her eyeshut darkness Ai felt only that this repeated sound was somehow relaxing, and her body began to loosen as a wonderful languor almost like sleep crept up on it.

Slowly, just a tiny crack, she opened her eyes and saw before her a sight as if from a dream, in which reality was as insignificant as a soap bubble<sup>[7]</sup> and high away from the ground.

“Hey.”

Her elbow suddenly bumped into something and she raised her head: the lion had his hand out to her, and was offering her a small bag of some sort.

“...What’s this?”

“Flavor sticks. They help with tiredness.”

The sticks in the bag were made of herbs boiled down until they were soft. Ai took one and, poking it beneath the mask, placed it experimentally into her mouth.

“Woah! The mint is so strong!”

“That’s why I said they’d help.”

The lion chuckled from under his mask. Ai had been shocked when the taste first hit her, block of solid freshness that it was, but now found after a bit of determined chewing that it wasn’t so bad after all. Before long, her tiredness vanished without a trace.

“I kind of feel like drinking something now. Something simple, like water—that’d match this flavor quite nicely.”

“We got nothing like that here—and besides, what if you got to go to the toilet after drinking it? We’ve got so few toilets here in Ortus that you can count them on the fingers of your hand.”

“What? Really?”

“Ain’t it obvious? The dead don’t have to eat, so they don’t have to shit either. We’re not like the living.”

At this point a somewhat unusual customer wandered in. If the proprietor of this stall was strange, this customer wasn’t far off either: the two conducted their business entirely with motions of their hands, neither saying a single word.

Ai waited patiently until the cat-faced customer departed.

“How did you know that I’m alive?”

Thanks to her straw hat, mask, and new jacket there wasn’t a single inch of her flesh which showed. By rights no casual passer-by should have been able to tell that she was alive. Unlike yesterday on the car, when she was gawked at by everyone she saw, today nobody on the streets took any notice of her.

“Your mask...”

The lion took a chewed flavor stick out from behind his mask and tossed it into a nearby bin.

“I made it for Keira-obasan back when I’d just gotten out of school.”

“Oh? So that’s how you knew?”

“...Even without the mask, the fact that you wanted a drink and were tired would’ve tipped anyone off. You’re doing a pretty bad job of hiding your identity.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“That’s exactly what you got to do, you idiot, or you’ll end up raising hell.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Let’s go with an example here.”

The lion tucked his chin and tilted his head, and the play of shadows on the dips and bumps of his mask coalesced into a single solid expression.

It was an expression of deepest weariness and simmering anger.

“If you were dead, and saw a living person in front of you, how’d you feel?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Okay, so with me seeing you like this, how’d do you think I feel?”

“...I don’t know.”

So the lion told her. That to say he didn’t feel envious was nothing short of a complete lie.

“Don’t go around flaunting your life in front of the dead.”

“...”

Ai nodded meekly.

“...I’m sorry.”

“You got nothing to be apologizing for...I mean, this is an issue concerning us and us only. You’re alive, we’re dead. That’s all there is to it, so don’t go feeling sorry or anything.”

Despite his words Ai remained as she was, curled unmoving in a fetal position.

Seeing her like this, the lion began jiggling his leg in discomfort; then he took the bag of flavor sticks and handed it to the fox.

“Come on, let’s turn that frown the other way round. Eat up.”

“Huh? But I’m still...”

“Ah, never mind, just take the whole thing.”

He stuffed the bag into her hand.

The lion grunted and slapped his knee in displeasure, and began to call out, as he should have many hours ago, “Cheap masks! Get ‘em cheap and get ‘em good!”. He was doing a rather bad job of it. Hearing him as he tried to solicit customers, the fox’s face broke beneath its mask into a small smile of gratitude for this man.

\*

As evening approached, the flow of people on the street swelled. Along with it rose the voices of the mask sellers as they worked to draw customers, and even the lion's stall grew busier from buyers coming in and out.

And yet, in the face of this increased business, the lion was closing up.



“You’re not selling any more, even now that business is improving?”

“It’s exactly because business is improving that I’m doing this.”

Quite matter-of-factly, the lion then added, “Because I wouldn’t be able to make masks otherwise.” Ai didn’t know whether to be dumbfounded or impressed at this.

“Well, see ya.”

The lion packed up his masks and tools and got up, and into the space he vacated immediately swarmed other mask sellers to open up their stalls.

But Ai just didn’t want to part so soon, and followed behind the lion’s rattling toolbox as he walked. He went downhill along the street, and she went with him;

and he ignoring her all the way until he finally turned into a small alleyway.

“... Hey, you’ve got to be going home too.”

“I want to stay and chat with Lion-san a while longer.”

The lion turned to face her. The dimness of the alleyway fell in shades on his mask, spelling out his solid and forceful rejection even before he spoke.

“Go—home—right—now. The sun sets fast around these parts, one minute you’re watching it sink and the next it’ll be gone. Ortus at night ain’t anything quite as nice as I am.”

“...Lion-san’s not that nice anyway.”

“What’d you say?!”

“Fine, since you insist! Goodbye!”

And the fox ran off on light footsteps.

“...Huh, stupid, hell if I care.”

Then he sighed, and hefted up his luggage.

\*

“I *said*, you should be going home now.”

A teashop on the outskirts of Mask Street.

The lion sat fuming at a second-floor table that overlooked the street, disapproval emanating from every part of his body.

“Longer! Just a little longer! I wanted to see that one!”

The fox was leaning her body over the balustrade, watching with excitement the *Hyakki Yakou*<sup>[8]</sup> procession beneath.

It was already evening.

“I’m serious, get home. You’re hungry, ain’t ya? I’ll get told off by obasan now.”

“It’s okay!”

It wasn’t as if there was anything to support that statement of hers. The lion, spent, hung his head and gave up.

The *Hyakki Yakou* procession on the street was originally a performing troupe. Their work was somewhere in between that of a busker and street entertainer, sometimes breathing fire and sometimes spinning magic tricks. They’d hand out fliers too, advertising in both sweet whisper and angered condemnation the *Bolivier Apparel*<sup>[9]</sup> clothes store. It seemed almost as if advertising was their main job and performing just an aside, but Ai had no way of confirming this.

It looked as if they quite liked being cheered on, especially if that cheering was loud. Perhaps the fox seemed particularly enthusiastic as she watched them from the second floor balcony, because troupe members would occasionally toss her flowers and release doves in her direction, and in the end four performers even stacked themselves into a human pyramid to address her at her height.

“Let’s buy go some purchaseable intelligence now! The Narle<sup>[10]</sup> Mask shop, at your service!

“R-Right! At my service!”

The fox took the fliers, and the performers immediately broke apart, leaving the air empty but for the clangor of the street.

But Ai continued to look upon it, as if something remained there that only she could see. And after a while, she took the flier and folded it carefully on the table.

“You don’t have to treat it like that. It ain’t some national treasure or anything, y’know.”

“I want to!”

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry, I’ll just mind my own business, then.”

The fox couldn’t fit the flier into her pocket, so she took everything out to sort them. There were the flavor sticks she’d received from the lion, and along with them some bitter-flavored sweets she hadn’t had to chance to examine and hairpins with little decorations attached. All had been given to her for free.

The lion glanced at them out of the corner of his eye and began to speak to himself in a tone which conveyed a fervent and exasperated desire to sigh.

“...I knew it. I’ve known it from back when I was just a little kid, running around causing trouble for others. Someone me would only ever have the very worst of luck...”

“Did you say something?”

“Nothin’ at all”, the lion replied, before lapsing in to a silence and wondering why he’d gotten himself into a situation like this.

Back at his residence after returning directly from the teashop, the lion suddenly remembered that he was going to buy brushes on the way home. This really was nothing more than a task forgotten, and if it had been any other day he would have gone straight back out with a tut and a shake of his head. But today he found himself looking for excuses. He told himself that it wouldn’t matter if he bought it the next day, and forced himself to sit himself down and continue his work.

But he was restless.

Though the work of his hands was one that called for concentration, the lion found himself imagining quite easily the little fox, lost on the paths of Mask Street. The more he mulled over them the more fantastical the scenes in his mind became, until corpse-hustling toughs and wizened crones out to kidnap children began to surround the fox of his imagination.

The second time he slipped up drawing lines on a mask’s cheek, he made up his mind. He flung a ferocious streak of red across his lion’s mask and dashed out of the door. Looking very much like a real lion, his eyes blazed apart the darkness of the alleys, arcing golden trails in the throbbing air.

Night fell deeply, and the crowds waxed in even greater number. There was another stall now where the lion’s stood in the day, and its owner reported seeing no such fox come by. Untiringly, the lion immediately left and began running along the uphill road, describing the fox to those people he knew whom he passed, asking them to look out for her as well. He had just prepared himself to find her even if it meant overturning the whole of the Ortus nightscape, when

there she was before him.

She was in the Gorius<sup>[11]</sup> Mask Store, one of the larger and more famous ones on Mask Street. Its owner was Gorius of a Thousand Faces, a man advanced in his age and just as well-known as his store. And she was sitting in his lap, his hand running along her head and patting her golden hair.

The lion hurriedly wiped his mask clean from its badly made-up state and, with profuse apology, approached the fox. Across the vastness of the city and its numberless streets, he had managed to meet with her again.

It was a meeting of vain and hollow joy.

Thinking that this was an opportunity he might never have again, the lion had thanked Gorius humbly for looking after her. Then he had taken the chance to ask him, if he wouldn't mind, to remember his name.

And Gorius' response had been one typical of his character.

"A lion does not borrow the authority of a fox."<sup>[12]</sup>

The words had fallen like the lash of a whip. Beaten, the lion scrambled, stumbled, ran up and away and out of sight. The fox started then: refusing the invitation to stay from the much-survived<sup>[13]</sup> old man, she took off without the barest hint of hesitancy in the direction the droop-tailed lion had gone when he ran away.

The lion couldn't remember very well what had happened afterwards. All he knew was that he had told the fox, again and again, to return home.

Perhaps the fox didn't notice the lion's dejection: she stayed excitably by his side, talking, pointing, annoying him to no end.

The lion rested his chin on a balustrade, and looked down at hubbub he'd years ago already grown accustomed to.

There was something new there, something unfamiliar which he'd never seen there before.

"It's the Princess."

"Huh?"

“There, the ‘brand new comedy-tragical drama’ from Silver Ring Theatres<sup>[14]</sup>, *Koroshiohake and the Princess of the Dead*. They probably don’t have government authorization, with a title as risky as that.”

There was a young woman sitting on a palanquin where the lion pointed. Her cheeks were painted crimson and her skin powdered white as snow. She had clearly been made up to resemble one of the living, but surely the princess wouldn’t wear makeup as heavy as this.

Nor would she be anywhere near as sociable.

“Brand new plot! Brand new plot! A whole new story to add to the Ortus mythos! A brand new comedy-tragical drama from Silver Ring Theatres! Hello, ladies and gentlemen! I’m Amietta!<sup>[15]</sup> I’ve been lucky enough to be picked for the female lead for this production! Please keep supporting me, everyone!

The woman handed out fliers from the palanquin in a friendly and intimate manner.

“They shouldn’t even be doin’ this. Hey! You! Joke of an actor!”

The lion suddenly gave a great bellow, making the fox jump from her chair in shock.

“What kinda shit princess you trying to be? Looks no different from any country girl I know!”

The woman looked around for the speaker before spotting the lion and glaring straight at him as she spoke.

“What do you want, you joke of a mask maker? Got a problem with our interpretation? Bad news: the classy kind of princess that weirdoes<sup>[16]</sup> like you want is just the kind we won’t do! If you like fairy tales that much, why don’t you go sleep with a storybook under your pillow?”

The lion immediately raised his hands in surrender. Throwing down a “Shut the hell up, bitch!” as a parting shot, he retreated to the rear of the balcony.

“So what if I’m a bitch? Everyone! Do you like me tight, or do you like me loose?

The woman flapped up the hem of her dress in a provocative motion, baring to

view her smooth white legs. Watching men began to hoot at the sight, transforming her into an instant celebrity, and fliers disappeared into the crowd with the speed of flight.

“That’s Beliver<sup>[17]</sup>. We were classmates.”

The lion was sprawled on a table, looking for all the world like a joke of a man.

“Her dream was to act a leading role in the Enkinza<sup>[18]</sup> Troupe.”

He gazed at the dancing princess on the street with faraway eyes.

“—She even said that, when she did, she’d wear one of my masks onstage.”

“That’s awesome!”

“Yeah, and she also said, ‘Make sure you become the best mask maker in the whole of Ortus.’ Huh, who’d she think she was?”

“That’s tough...”

“It was alright, but...”

Under the slanting lamplight, the lion’s mask seemed to smile with a grim ferocity.

“It *was* my dream, after all.”

Then he added, in a low voice, “And it’s not like it was anything special of a dream.”

And there was a quiet applause.

“That’s amazing.”

He turned, saw Ai gently clapping her hands.

“You’re really cool, Lion-san.”

“Don’t clap, you idiot. Stop it.”

The fox, gazing on the lion with excited eyes, ignored him.

“Jeez...You, what dreams *you* got?”

“My dream?”

“Yeah.”

“Eh—No—That’s...”

The fox was suddenly flustered and tongue-tied.

“Will you...laugh at me, after hearing it?”

“Don’t plan to.”

“Or get scared away?”

“...Your dream’s one that scares people away?”

The fox hemmed and hawed for a little while, then picked up her courage and, a little tentatively, spoke.

“I want to save the world.”

“Oh?”

He didn’t laugh, didn’t draw away in shock or fear or contempt. He accepted this answer of hers with a quiet respect. But his craft hadn’t been advanced enough to depict emotions on masks: seeing no change on the lion’s expressionless features, the fox worriedly asked him:

“Y-You don’t think it’s weird?”

“Nah. What, did you get laughed at for it before?”

“Um, I told Kiriko about it, and he said ‘What a foolish dream’...”

“Him, huh...”

The lion’s tone had abruptly changed.

“Don’t take what that idiot says seriously...”

In his words was an undercurrent of rage which he couldn’t conceal. Ai heard it, and didn’t say anything more.

Right away the lion realized that he’d soured the mood and wanted to talk about something nicer, but the words wouldn’t come. Ai turned her gaze back to the street, faking an interest on the proceedings below.

The lion gave up on talking. He’d make Kiriko pay for it later.

This was all his fault.

## Translation Notes[[edit](#)]

1. [↑](#) More accurately 文学少年, or “literary youths”.
2. [↑](#) Historical note: knee breeches typically worn by European upper-class men between 15th and 19th centuries. Basically, puffed shorts. With Ai they don’t quite reach to her knees (or anywhere near them), though.
3. [↑](#) Entry permit for their 7-day sojourn.
4. [↑](#) ケラ ヲエナ/Kera Vena
5. [↑](#) デヴァ茶 / deva cha
6. [↑](#) I suspect the jacket in question is a Happi coat (the Japanese just says, rather unhelpfully, はおり); but that sounds too weird in this fantasy setting. If I discover something wrong with “jacket”, later on I’ll rectify this. Alternatively, if you can translate that bit of Japanese, an edit would be very welcome.
7. [↑](#) Translator’s addition.
8. [↑](#) 百鬼夜行, a parade of youkai which supposedly manifests on summer nights in Japanese folklore. Obviously, this procession does not contain real *youkai*.
9. [↑](#) ボリビエ洋品店 / boribie youhinten.
10. [↑](#) ナーレ / naare.
11. [↑](#) ゴリアス / goriasu
12. [↑](#) This is a play on an idiom about faking authority for personal gain, in which a fox tries to convince a tiger of his might. They walk through a forest, and all the animals they meet shy away. The fox explains this as the animals all being afraid of him; but of course, the reader knows that they are in reality afraid of the tiger. Here, Gorius is berating the lion for trying to use his connection to the fox (his false authority) to gain a business partner.
13. [↑](#) Literally, “who had survived numerous battles”.
14. [↑](#) 銀環劇場 / ginkan gekijou, if you can’t stand a literal translation
15. [↑](#) アミエッタ / amietta
16. [↑](#) The nuance is more similar to “otaku”, in both the not-talking and in the

pervertedness.

17. [↑](#) ベリベラ / beribera

18. [↑](#) 炎金座 / enkinza